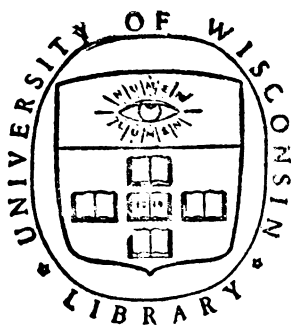

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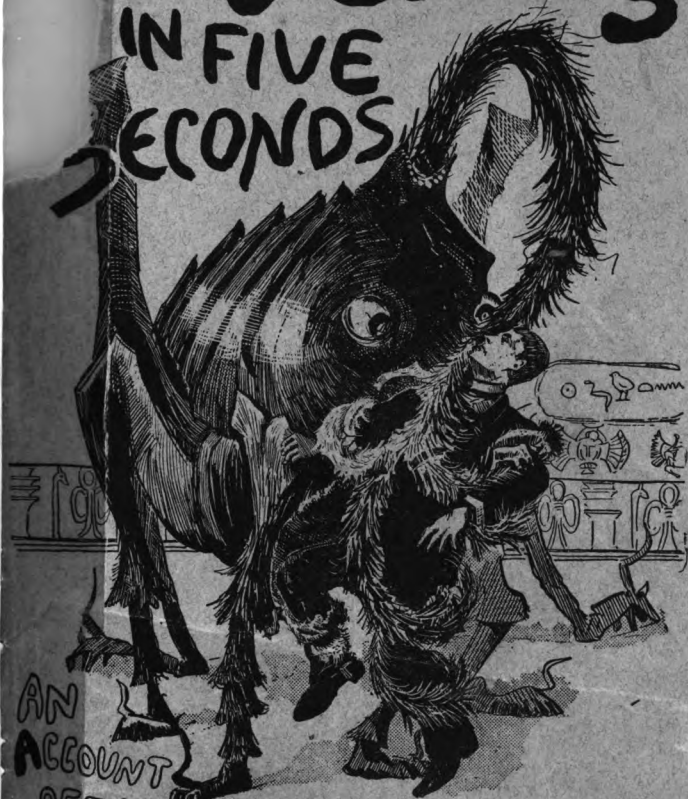
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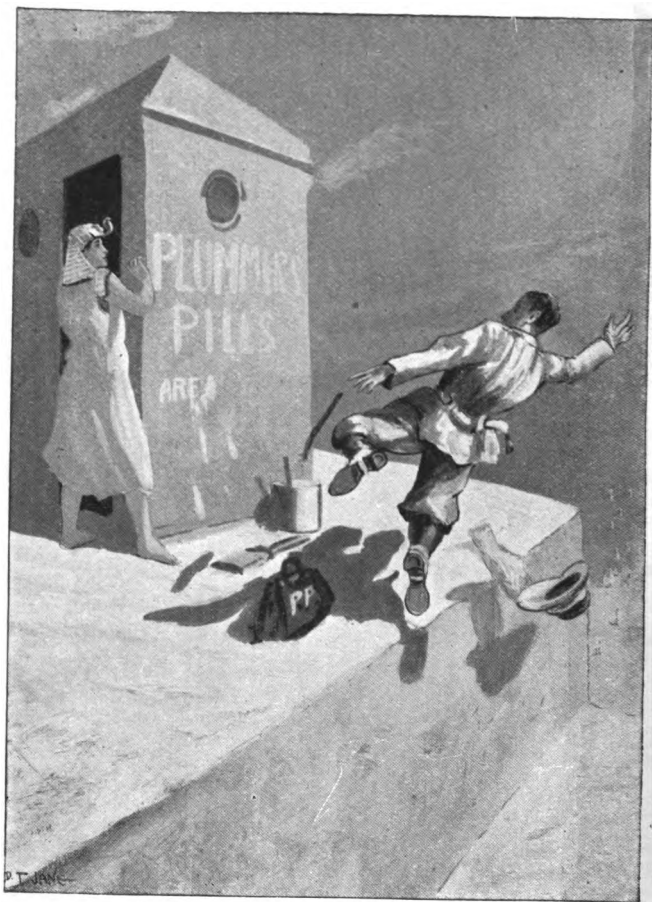
TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS



AN
ACCOUNT
OF THE STRANGE
DISAPPEARANCE
OF THOMAS PLUMMER, PHARMACEUTICAL
By FRED T. JANE

A. D. INNES & CO., Bedford Street

**TO VENUS IN FIVE
SECONDS**



"Holy Moses !"

[See page 127.]

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS ;

Being an Account of
the Strange Disappearance of Thomas
Plummer, Pill-maker,

BY
FRED. T. JANE,

AUTHOR OF "THE INCUBATED GIRL," AND "BLAKE OF
THE RATTLESNAKE"

ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR

LONDON
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CHAPTER I

THOMAS PLUMMER, MEDICAL STUDENT

IN the year—well it doesn't matter much what year it was—I, Thomas Plummer, was a medical student at —— Hospital, London. I was no particular credit to the hospital; Nature never intended me to be an exponent of the healing art—as some ironical wag has termed it—and I had no desire to try and outrage Nature, my medical studies had taught me the folly of that, so I let Nature have her sway, and amused myself as a young fellow fresh from the country is apt to do when let loose in London.

My father was a big pill-maker—"Plum-

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mer's Pill" is a household word—so, of course, I had plenty of money: the mere mention of the pill implies that. Did you know all the business details of that pill, you would be able to roughly calculate the immensity of the family wealth; and all this money being due to me in the process of time, you will understand that I didn't take up a profession without protest; but the old man was obdurate.

"You must be a doctor," said he. "It will be to the credit of the pill, and I'll spend twenty thousand pounds in advertising you."

"But," I urged, "that wouldn't be allowed; doctors mayn't advertise."

"Nonsense," said he. "They mayn't stick ads. in the papers, maybe; but they get there all the same. I shall just pay a few impecunious lords and ladies to go round telling how you've cured 'em of some pretty well mortal complaint, and your name will be made in no time; and you'll be in Harley Street, specialist for everything and Lord Chief Doctor, or whatever is the medical equivalent. And when you get there, just you prescribe the pill and let Nature do the rest, then all the other doctors will follow your lead."

"I don't know," I answered, doubtfully; "doctors are rum beggars, and I fancy they

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have a rule never to give a patent remedy. 'Tisn't medical etiquette."

"Rubbish," he roared, "rubbish ! They don't give it for fear of curing their patients, which isn't their lay ; but you'll cure 'em, my boy, and then no one will listen to the others ! So in you go, or I cut you off with a shilling. Which'll you choose ? "

Well, of course I chose the profession ; but I explained to him that examinations had to be passed, and that I'd never shone in that line at school or college.

"Bunkum !" was his comment. "I believe in Ibsen and heredity ; and you, being my son, must have a brain on you. No, my boy, if you don't pass in flying, 'twill be because the doctors are jealous of the pill—afraid of it ! "

When the old man said this I plucked up heart. It dawned upon me that there was a good time ahead, no need to work with this excuse he had framed for me ; so, like a dutiful son, I accepted at once, and expressed eagerness to go and begin.

He was so delighted that he gave me right away a cheque that I was unable to spend within six months, though I tried to the best of my ability.

I did not frequent the hospital very much. I haven't got that natural craving to see pain and smell blood that every born doctor has,

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and when I did attend I generally had to be carried out fainting, and to this fainting is due the extraordinary series of adventures that have since been my lot—a faithful account of which I have tried to write here.

They had been doing an experiment—operation, I mean—one afternoon, one of those little things that are best not described, though there was really nothing in it except that the subject was a nice-looking, modest little girl—I was taken out fainting.

They got me outside all right—four of them, for I am pretty big and heavy, and with them came a lady student, a Miss Zumeena, whom I had noticed before owing to her uncivilised sort of name. That, at least, is what I thought it then; afterwards—but we shall come to that in good time.

They threw some water in my face, down my neck mostly, making the while such infernally personal remarks about the pill, that I hadn't the cheek to come round in the middle of it. Besides, they had a knack of expecting you to go back if you came round too quickly, and I had a particular appointment that afternoon. So I still kept in a dead faint.

After a time three of them got tired and hurried back to the lecture-room, and I was just going to sigh and open my eyes when

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Miss Zumeena began to speak to the man who remained.

"Mr. Watts," said she, speaking as coolly as though I were an in-patient, "he is a long time coming round. His fainting fits are really very interesting and abnormal. Would it not be a good idea to take advantage of the opportunity, and have a little private scientific investigation upon this subject?"

I was too startled to open my eyes, and I lay in pretty well a real faint for some seconds.

Watts—he was one of those studious, undersized little fellows who come out of all their exams. with honours, but get very few patients afterwards—gave a sort of cough, and began to say that he didn't quite catch her meaning.

"Nonsense," she returned, "you know well enough. A little curare—I have a syringe in my pocket. That will keep him quiet, and any pain he feels he will put down to his fainting attack when he recovers. No one will be passing through here for another half-hour."

"Really, Miss Zumeena," said he, "the opportunity seems specially provided; also it would be useful to cure him from future attacks. An ounce of practice is worth a hundredweight of theory." He said this with a sort of snigger. I don't think he

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quite liked the idea, but at the time I fancied him gloating over me and showing his yellow teeth.

"Then let us not delay," said she. "We will stimulate the different nerve-centres of the brain and note the effect——"

"I'm damned if you will!" I roared. "D'you think I'm an in-patient?"

I jumped up and caught Watts one right between the eyes just as he was bending over me; then, as I couldn't treat her the same, I asked her rather strongly what she meant by it.

"Restrain yourself, young man," said she. "I fancied you would come round so soon as you thought that any pain would happen to you."

"That's all very well," I retorted, still angry, though the sight of Watts sitting upon the floor half-dazed soothed me a bit; "that's all very well, but d'you expect me to believe it?"

"If you have acquired any medical training whatever," she replied, still as cool as anything, "you must know that curare exercises a paralysing influence, and that under it you would be unable to move. Therefore, of what possible use would it have been to stimulate your nerve-centres with a view to noting the reflex action?"

This was a poser, but somehow I was not

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convinced, though for the life of me I couldn't tell whether or no the action of curare would be as she made out.

"Perhaps," said she, seeming to read my doubts, "you would like to search my pockets; then, when you find that I have neither syringe nor drug about me, you will cease to doubt my word."

Of course I couldn't do this, and I couldn't go on telling her that I disbelieved without appearing terribly rude, so—after another glance at Watts—I made some sort of apology.

"That will do," she said, checking me, and giving a half-laugh as she spoke. "I have not the pleasure of knowing your name?"

"Plummer, madam, at your service."

"Plummer," she repeated, "the pill-maker? . . . Well, good-day to you, Mr. Plummer, and I hope that in future you will be less subject to fainting attacks. Now I must hurry back."

I gave Watts a hand to get up, and told him I was sorry, but that he shouldn't play practical jokes on a bigger man than himself. He didn't take my remarks in any friendly spirit, as he went off muttering something about fellows with more money than brains who wasted the time of cleverer men than themselves. He quite forgot that

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I hadn't asked him to, but I made allowances for him.

Then I, too, cleared off, and sent a telegram to my father telling him that I had fainted again, but was still determined to stick to the medical profession at whatever cost. He rather liked my fainting fits, I think, and used to have paragraphs put into the evening papers about them till I asked him not to. Some of the people at the hospital did not fancy it, you see, and they made unpleasant remarks.

However, as my father said, this was doubtless nothing but jealousy at the healing attributes of the pill, and he sent me money to soothe my injured feelings. I was remarkably sensitive in those days.

CHAPTER II

A LONG JOURNEY

I WAS ill for about a week, so far as I recollect, and the nourishments and amusements necessary to restore me to my normal state of health cost me a little matter of thirty pounds or more. At the end of that time I returned to the hospital, and about the first person I saw was Miss Zumeena. I was not particularly anxious to speak to her, but she came up to me and held out her hand.

“Mr. Plummer,” said she, “accept my cordial congratulations on your recovery. I was beginning to be afraid that I had been the means of frightening you away.”

Now if there is one thing more than another that I object to it is being accused of timidity, because I have the average amount of pluck; so I hastily told her I’d forgotten all about it, and then began to talk to her concerning theatres and such like, till

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she turned the conversation into other channels by describing some operation that I'd "missed" by my absence. The operation didn't interest me; I was an indifferent listener, and paid more attention to her and her appearance than to what she was telling me.

She was, when I came to examine her, a most extraordinary looking woman. She wasn't ugly exactly—indeed, for a lady-doctor, she was remarkably good-looking, and would have been passable as a nurse for that matter—but I saw that she was covered all over her face and hands with a sort of red down, and her skin was a funny red sort of colour—a bricky tint. She was tall, rather flat-faced, with a small nose and thickish lips—well, just like the faces upon some of the mummied ladies in the British Museum—Egyptian department. They have a mummy there of the lady Katebt, who might almost have been this lady-doctor. She spoke, too—though I had not noticed it when I first made her acquaintance—with a sort of foreign accent, and every now and again used to chatter to herself in some heathen language unknown, not French or German—a certain amount of which had been caned into me at school—but something more like Japanese, something with a lot of little two-letter syllables. One of her favourite expres-

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sions was *ret*, which took my fancy so much that I used it as a swear-word, and astonished a man I'd been at Cambridge with, who wondered where I got it, and said it was an old Egyptian genitive meaning "of men," which might have been true for all I could do to gainsay it, as he well knew, when he seized this opportunity to air his knowledge. Then he went on to explain to me that Miss Zumeena was probably a Copt, a remark in which I cordially agreed. I learnt later how this was not very far wrong ; though I agreed then because I didn't happen to know what a Copt was.

Well, she chatted away to me about the operation, and I returned indifferent answers, "yes" and "no," until she had done. I supposed that, woman-like, she loved the sound of her own voice, so I let her chatter ; my medical knowledge was not enough to answer her intelligently.

After this Miss Zumeena and I grew more or less friendly. She seemed to take a good deal of interest in me ; always asking how my studies progressed, and wanting to help me.

At first, seeing that she was a budding lady-doctor, I put this down to mere scientific enthusiasm ; but, by and by, I began to fancy that there was a warmer feeling at the bottom of it. I was naturally

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a trifle gallant ; and, perhaps, I grew a shade more attentive to her after this discovery than I had been before, because I was genuinely flattered. So far I had not come across anything of the nature of disinterested affection in the ladies of my acquaintance, and this, such as it was, seemed certainly free from self-advantage schemes. For in the hospital I thought more or less as the hospital, and the hospital regarded Miss Zumeena with much respect. None of them respected me, unless it were Watts, and that was merely a physical matter, and in scientific circles physical attainments are reckoned of little account.

About a month after our first acquaintance the lady and I were on fairly intimate terms ; that is, I used to joke with her about the proposed vivisection of myself, and occasionally we would walk across the park together. She lived out in the Bayswater direction, and gradually I got into a habit of seeing her home. I wasn't fond of the girl at all ; but she had somehow managed to make me feel that she was superior to me in every way, and I was flattered at her seeming partiality for my society. It was only natural.

One day—a day I shall never forget—she asked me to come in and have a cup of tea. I accepted at once. There seemed some-

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thing irresistibly charming in having a "little affair" with a lady-doctor, especially this particular one. Since she and I had been friendly several of our fellows had tried to cut me out, but they met with no success. She told one of the men whom she snubbed that I was far and away the finest man physically of the lot of them. It wasn't saying very much, for they were mostly a weedy, studious lot ; but I was very pleased when I heard about it. When a man has no chance to be respected for his brain, admiration for his physique is a valued substitute.

We had tea in the best parlour, or whatever her landlady called it, a most ordinary commonplace room with paper fans stuck about all over the place, and bits of muslin tied round flowerpots. Miss Zumeena saw, I suppose, that I didn't admire the place, for she began to complain about it herself presently, and to talk of her home in some foreign land.

This was sentimental ; and, by and by, after I'd sampled some excellent champagne that she insisted on my having, I began to get a bit sentimental too.

We went out into the garden for me to have a cigarette—the landlady forbade smoking in the house. It was one of those little back-yard places that you find in London, little bigger than an ordinary room, and the

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only thing noticeable about it was a queer kind of summer-house down at the end, against a low wall, over which some of a neighbour's washing was visible in the sunset.

I didn't like to appear interested in these garments in the presence of a lady; so I threw all my attention on to the summer-house, which was the only other thing to look at.

"Let's sit in the summer-house," said I, a trifle unsteadily.

She answered readily enough, and ran back a sliding-door. We entered a quaint little room with a good deal of machinery in one corner of it, thick cushions upon the seats and so on—the place looked a cross between a laboratory and a padded room.

"I do a few experiments here occasionally," she said in answer to my questioning look—"it is a cosy little den, is it not?"

"Very," said I, lighting a cigarette, and wishing that we had brought along the champagne. It was getting to be quite an adventure, I felt; and I intended to have a little fun.

"We will sit here awhile and discuss to-day's lecture," she went on; "and perhaps you'd like a little more fizz while we talk."

I nearly laughed in her face when she said "fizz"; it sounded so incongruous in her mouth; but I restrained myself and said

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I shouldn't mind ; whereupon, off she ran to get it.

I looked round the place, and found that the machinery was mostly a series of levers. I touched one and it made all my hair stand on end, after which I meddled no more—electricity is a force that I have always distrusted ever since some fellow played a silly joke upon me with a galvanic battery.

She was back again before I had time to investigate any further ; then we sat down, she talking science and I attacking the champagne, and by and by I found my arm round her waist. There was something so ludicrous in making love to a lady-doctor.

She didn't seem to mind at all, not even when I tried to kiss her. I don't know why I kissed her, because she wasn't, as I have before explained, particularly attractive, except when compared to other lady-doctors ; still it gave me a sort of record for myself. I ran it over in my own mind, a kind of biography—"Thomas Plummer, son of the Plummer's Pill Plummer, man who never won but a single game of billiards in his life, and then when he was three parts drunk ; who only spotted a winner in a horse-race when he put on the horse he didn't mean to ; who once kissed a lady-doctor, and who——" Here I was interrupted by my divinity.

"I think," said she, "that you had better

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close the door. Osculatory exercises are better performed in private."

"Certainly, my dear," said I, winking to myself as I thought how much all women were alike. I got up and ran the door back. It slid easily, and closed with a sort of click, so that I wondered whether I had locked it and began to fumble for the latch, though I could not find any.

"Never mind," she said, smiling. "Stand still a minute."

She reached over to the machinery and began to move it about, while I struck a match to see where I was, for it was very dark inside and I began to feel dizzy in the blackness.

"You have a splendid physique," she went on. "It were a thousand pities that it should be lost to science. Sit down."

I obeyed her. She said it in a sort of way that I couldn't resist, much as though she had added "or it will be the worse for you." I am sure that that is what she meant from the ring of her voice. So I sat down and poured out another glass of champagne, and tossed it off to collect my thoughts.

She was still fooling about with the machinery, and somehow a horrible idea came into my head that she might be mad and going to asphyxiate the both of us. I asked her to open the door.

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"In one moment we shall be there," said she. "Enjoy yourself while there is time."

This might mean anything; and I, of course, put it down to be everything except what it actually was. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have thought just what I thought, for all that she did not look
3 amorous; but just then I was more anxious to get out than anything else.

"I say," I stuttered, "won't your landlady think it funny your being shut in here with me?"

She laughed then, positively laughed. "We have done with the landlady. She is millions of miles away! *We are now floating in the atmosphere of the planet you call Venus!*"

She made this astounding statement much as she might have explained that we were in Bark Place, Bayswater, and when I heard it I began to wish that I had attended the brain lectures a little more. I had no doubt, in my own mind, that she had suddenly gone off her head, or else had been insane all along, and was now showing it; but I had no idea at all of how to proceed, except that I had read somewhere that to humour a lunatic was often a good thing. Therefore I said, as easily as I could—

"Yes, just over Venus. 'That star of the West, by whose shadowy splendour, At

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twilight so often,' etcetera—as the poet Moore has it.”

For answer she pulled a bolt in the wall and a scuttle fell back. A blinding light seemed to shoot into the place, stabbing my eyes so that for awhile I could see nothing. She handed me a pair of very dark blue spectacles, which I put on and gained some relief; then, looking through the scuttle, I saw the most extraordinary sight that I have ever witnessed.

Imagine a vast plain flashing up every colour of the rainbow—colours distinctly visible, even through the indigo of the glasses — with intense complementary shadows every here and there. There is nothing anywhere else that I can compare it to, though the nearest simile I can think of is to bid you imagine yourself suddenly reduced to the size of a bee and poised over some gorgeous flower garden—that, at least, is the impression which I had as I gazed upon this bewildering picture. The vegetation was at once strange and yet familiar. I felt it was familiar when first I saw it; but I had looked for some considerable while before it struck me that the most of it was nothing but our minor earth vegetation multiplied a thousandfold in size. I saw flowers like giant pansies, that must have been quite fifty feet in diameter; enormous

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nasturtiums, that seemed to stretch for miles ; huge trees full of immense scarlet blossoms, great patches of colour seemingly measurable by the acre ; toadstools swelled beyond all imagination ; and here and there among them crawled indescribable creatures big as men peopling the vegetation with life.

I watched it all, spellbound, for some moments ; then I broke into a loud laugh.

“By Jove ! Miss Zumeena,” I cried, “this is clever ! I see it now. This scuttle is a huge magnifying glass, and you’ve turned it on to the garden ! It’s the smartest invention I’ve ever heard of ; why, there’s millions in it if you only patent it—millions ! It would draw like wildfire for an Earl’s Court Exhibition !”

She merely smiled in an enigmatical fashion at my words, and pulling another lever sprung open the door.

CHAPTER III

AN IDYLL ON THE PLANET VENUS

I GAVE up the magnifying-glass idea at that, for going over to the door I saw that the ground was quite fifty feet below, rising slowly up to meet us. I began to have all sorts of queer sensations, the chief of them being that I had either been hypnotised in some sort of fashion or else had developed a new and original form of delirium tremens, I was undecided between the two.

What do you think now ?" she asked.

"Think ?" said I. "Why, I guess you've outdone Maskelyne and Cook—beat them hollow—for I'll be hanged if I can tell how you've done it."

"Nor would you understand if I explained. Briefly, however, I may tell you that this summer-house, as you call it, is a travelling-car of the Sutenrāa, an ingenious mechanical device that your intelligence could not com-

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prehend, a development of the force that the pyramids were built for."

"Yes," I said, feebly. I didn't believe a word of it. Then I smiled and complimented her again, because I considered the invention very creditable. I think I asked her, too, whether she intended selling it to the Westminster Aquarium or to the Alhambra.

"You are still sceptical," she said, a little severely.

"Not at all," said I, as solemnly as I could. "Wouldn't be polite, you know." I'd concluded that there were laurels to be gained by being intimate with a young woman who could invent things like this.

"I'll tell you what," I went on, "I'll get old Simpkins, our advertising manager, to float this affair for you if you like. He's had no end of experience with my governor's pills, and——" Here she interrupted me with an impatient wave of the hand.

"Is it possible," said she, "that you are really such a fool, Mr. Plummer—or is it mere pretence?"

This was unkind of her, and rather a shock to my philanthropic schemes, and I made no answer for awhile. I noticed, as I stood trying to think of something to say, that the air was heavy with the aromatic scent of flowers, almost over-poweringly so, and that

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this same perfume seemed to have a cooling effect. The heat that came in at the door was not imaginary, it was horribly intense, a regular furnace blast ; but the smell of the blossoms subdued it, and gradually I noticed neither the one nor the other.

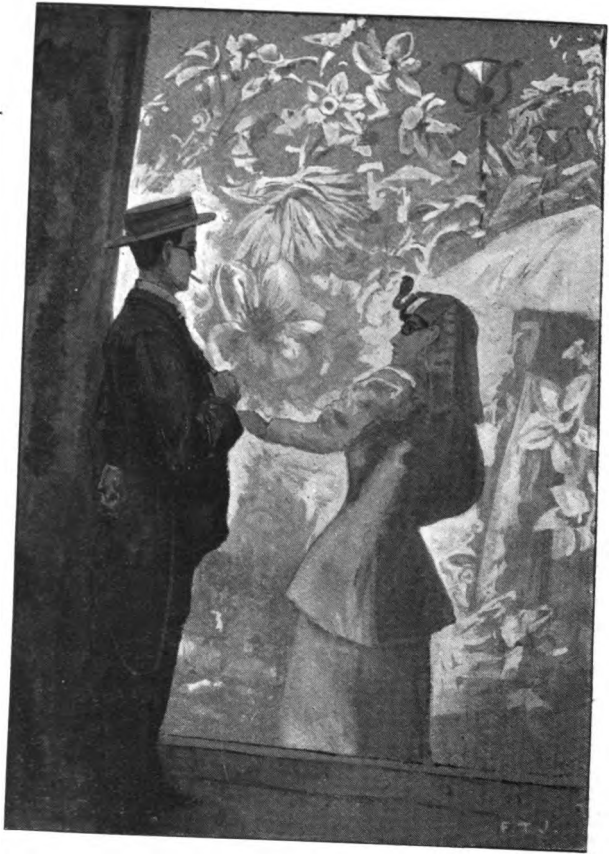
"Let us go out," she said, taking off her hat, and putting on a queer-shaped head-dress, with a very puffy snake stuck on the front by way of ornament.

The summer-house was now standing upon the ground, a sort of violet-tinted moss, with a big nasturtium throwing black-green shadows across it at a little distance.

I thought her invitation to step out was not serious, and just stood looking at her, wondering at the curious expression upon her face ; she seemed to be in two minds about something. Then she spoke, very irrelevantly, it seemed to me—

"Science," said she, "is more important than affection."

"It is, indeed," I acquiesced, for I thought that if she were going to run after me, a little coyness on my part would be a good thing. It's never wise to be in too great a hurry—especially in matters of sentiment ; and I knew precious little about this young woman. For all I could tell to the contrary she might have a husband that she was tired of, and have settled upon me as a handy co-



Out she went.

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respondent, which would have been a nuisance all round, and done a lot of harm to Plummer's Pill: the public looks for a high code of morality in its pill purveyors, and I should have—metaphorically, of course—to live upon that Pill.

"Then," she went on in a melancholy voice, "let us step out. You have certainly a very fine physique."

"Very," I responded lightly, as I prepared to follow her. I had stopped thinking about the scenery and all that, as I was busy wondering what she was driving at with all this admiration of my physique. I remembered, all at once, the first time that she had alluded to it on the day of my fainting fit, when she had suggested experimenting upon me, and I felt a sort of uncomfortable creepy feeling in my back—a feeling I couldn't account for at all, but it was there all the same.

Well, out she went, and I, seeing that she had actually done it, followed, to find myself up to the knees in a sort of thick violet-coloured moss which struck hot as boiling water and made me jump. I settled in my mind at that moment that I had really developed a new form of delirium tremens, and I remember thinking how pleased all the doctors would be—there's nothing your doctor gloats over like a new disease or an old one in a new form.

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"You will get used to it presently," she said, watching my actions with that irritating smile of hers—"also we shall strike the road in a minute. I generally give subjects a walk ; it tones them up."

"Does it ?" said I. "Well, anyway it's tiring, and the sun is infernally hot. Let's sit down a bit—there's no hurry."

Then I put my arm round her waist—she had rather a nice little waist. I was quite sure that I had D. T.'s., and was interested in watching the developments—I had had enough medical training to feel an interest in my case—the champagne did the rest.

She let me put my arm round her and dropped her head on my shoulder in a soft, cooing sort of way for a moment; then she suddenly wrenched herself free, rose, and said shortly that we must hurry on. Then she seemed to change again, and, catching my two hands in her own, said—

"Let us go back. You have a splendid physique, it is true ; but there are others on earth besides you—Science can do without you."

"Oh, hang Science!" said I, wondering if I were *very* drunk, and whether she noticed it much—"let's sit down again, and have a little chat. I seem to have lost my bearings."

All this time I was looking round trying to find the house or the neighbour's washing,

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but I could see nothing save a brilliant blaze of colour all around me; and presently, tilting up the smoked glasses, which I still wore, to see how that would help me, my eye met a blinding dazzle of torturing light, a great flaming ball of brilliancy that seemed to sear my eyeballs with excruciating pain. I slipped down the glasses in a second, but for some minutes I was blind as a bat.

"You looked at the sun," she said.

"Sun be damned!" I cried, for my head was splitting with pain. "Excuse me, Miss Zumeena, but the fact is, I'm beastly drunk." And then I fell to describing to her all that I had seen in that vision, apologising parenthetically again and again for my condition.

"You are quite sober," she returned, "and your sensations are but natural. It is always the effect of Venus upon earth-folk. By the way, you can drop the 'Miss' in my name; here in my own land I am simply Zumeena."

"Zumeena be it then, my dear," said I, aimlessly, but she made no response.

We struck a road, which, so far as my temporary blindness would allow me to see, appeared to be of a very strong emerald tint. Its colour did not startle me much, however, since I had known men to see rats of most extraordinary hues when in a condition

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similar to what I considered mine ; indeed, I was rather relieved to find it abnormal, as it was an argument against the hypnotic idea.

The road, which we followed for about a quarter of a mile, was very easy to travel on, and I felt an exhilarating lightness as I stepped upon it—an easiness of gait that I attributed to the change from the wearisome tramp through the moss. All along the side of it were great posts at regular intervals. These I took to be electric lights, but I paid them very little attention, because, as I said before, I was quite certain that I was very drunk indeed, and that all I seemed to see was a mere hallucination ; I had an indistinct idea that I was in Hyde Park, and that was all. As to the girl's remarks — well, I put that down to mere jesting at me, to show my indignation at which I hung slightly behind and refused to talk.

Presently I had a hazy vision of an immense mound in front of us, with a great gateway set in the centre of it, and heavy columns on either side. I was wondering whether this were Hyde Park Corner or the gate up by the Marble Arch—for my eyesight was still too confused for me to make out any details—when Zumeena (as I may as well call her now) stopped suddenly, and began to speak some gibberish to a sort of double of herself whom we met. I did not

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pay much heed at first ; my fixed idea that I was drunk made me think that I merely saw her in pairs—a thing I had done before often enough. But after awhile, as my sight gradually improved, I saw that female number two was not a bit like my friend, and was quite differently attired. Zumeena, saving for her headgear, was dressed in the usual way women do dress in London, this other (Kaha, I learnt her name to be, later) was clad mostly in Nature's garments ; such clothing as she had was remarkably primitive—well, rather akin to one of the garments I had seen hanging on the clothes-line when Zumeena and I went out into the garden at Bark Place. I rubbed my eyes under my spectacles and looked at her again, but she was still there, dressed as before, and seemed remarkably unconcerned about it, too. I had a momentary idea that I was behind the scenes at the Empire ; then Kaha came up to me, where³ I stood idly toying with my fingers, and asked abruptly—

“ Do you drink ? ”

It seemed a very unnecessary question, and a bit personal too, seeing the conclusion that I had recently come by. I answered, still with the Empire idea in my mind, that I wouldn't take anything just then, as I thought that I'd had enough ; to which she grunted some contemptuous answer and

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began talking again to Zumeena in the foreign jargon. I heard the word *ret* repeated several times, and at length, anxious to do something to assert myself, I added, "meaning—'of men'" the next time one of them uttered it.

This had a most extraordinary effect upon the two women. They stopped talking at once, looked hard at me and each other, and then skipped off the roadway into the moss, whispering excitedly, looking ever and again at me the while. This did not long continue ; Kaha soon went on, and Zumeena and I once more set our faces towards the hill.

"Your lady friend seemed startled," said I. "Hope she won't think me rude for speaking without an introduction, but, reckoning by her costume, I didn't think she'd expect it or mind, you know."

"Do not be frivolous," she answered, curtly. "Tell me how you learnt our language?"

I told her how I'd come by the word *ret*, and how I'd learnt its meaning and the rest of it ; to which she replied that she had conjectured as much, and then walked on into the gateway.

Here it was very dark ; I was unable to see at all until I removed my spectacles ; then I found that we were in a long passage

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lit by occasional lights. As we advanced I noted side passages also lit up ; and in these I had visions of most extraordinary nightmare shapes, creatures that I cannot describe, for there is nothing on earth to liken them to. Before us was a very wide open space full of large buildings, to one of which Zumeena led me.

I have only a confused recollection of all this, partly because at the time I did not believe it to be real, partly in that subsequent events have clouded my memory of it. Now and again we met scantily-clad men and women, but no one took any notice of us ; and at last we reached the building whither we were bound—a kind of replica of an Egyptian temple externally, but inside fashioned more or less like an ordinary English house, save that the rooms were very large and the architecture still Egyptian.

“ Here,” said Zumeena, “ I will leave you. Give me your spectacles, then wander as you please. Here you will find food and drink, and whatever else you may need till you are wanted for another matter. Goodbye. I am half sorry that I brought you here, for your foolish ways have pleased me more than I thought ; but Science is a hard master, and your physique is undoubtedly admirable. But for your physique, perhaps, I had let you go ; so blame that and not me. I am sorry for

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you none the less, because—because——” Here she quite seemed to break down for awhile, and I saw her eyes glistening as with tears in the lamplight.

“Oh! come,” I said, making a violent effort to pull myself together, thinking that by so doing I should find myself once more in the Bayswater garden—“come, don’t take on like that, Miss Zumeena.” I couldn’t understand what she was driving at at all, but I worked it out that she was enamoured of me and didn’t want to show it. So I kissed her in a friendly sort of way and said goodbye.

Then, without any more farewell, she went, leaving me alone in the strange house.

CHAPTER IV

THE THOTHEN

FOR awhile I tried to get my bearings, still with that fixed idea that I was drunk. My head ached ; I felt drowsy and stupid ; I accepted the most extraordinary appearances in a most matter-of-fact way. I suppose, now, that I was too weary and startled to be able to feel any more surprise. It may sound incredible, but I calmly watched one of those creatures I had previously seen, crawling towards me, without either astonishment or concern—I was absolutely callous.

It came up to me with a slow, creepy motion, then putting forward what might, in the shadows, have been an immense arm, or, as I took it to be, a trunk, it touched me !

Then it spoke—Good God ! it actually spoke !

That settled me. I screamed right out with fear and terror at that. I tried to run

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away, but I was powerless in this mysterious grasp—though had I been otherwise there was nowhere to run to.

It spoke again—spoke in a soft, purring accent as though anxious to remove my fear, and to some extent it succeeded. *What* it said, I could not, of course, tell ; but the general run of the language was just the same as that which Zumeena had used, and I felt somehow that it was meant to reassure me. Then, half pushing, half carrying me, it guided me to a room a little further down the passage, into which it put me—withdrawing itself immediately afterwards.

The light in the room was very poor, an illuminating globe in the ceiling was turned low almost to the point of extinction ; I could only just dimly discern a couch in one corner, and on this I threw myself. I had given up all hopes of solving the mystery or making out where I was until I had had some sleep, and till I could lose the horrible repetition of that blazing disc which still hung over my retina, blurring my vision.

I don't know whether I slept or not, but I must have dozed for a space, then I was called back to the realities by a woman's groans seemingly near at hand.

I started up and looked around. For a moment I had an indistinct idea that I was in the lock-up, that the groans proceeded

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from a fellow-prisoner in an adjoining cell ; but, on looking round the room, my eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, made out a girl sitting on a couch at the other end of the place.

This was awkward, and I coughed to attract her attention preparatory to attempting some apology, but the instant that she heard me she rose to her feet.

"Oh, God !" she cried to me, "are you a man—human man, or one of these devils come to torment ?"

"I'm a man, madam, at your service. I must really apologise for this intrusion, but——" Here she interrupted me.

"Ah," she said, "you are newly come. You know nothing, guess nothing—it is all to you just as it is to the ox going to the slaughter-house. You guess nothing, fear nothing—why should you ?"

"Really, madam," I began, "the fact is I came here with a lady acquaintance, who has gone off and left me. *Where* I am I've not the remotest idea, unless—unless it's the police-cells. To tell you the honest truth, I'm afraid I'm rather intoxicated, you know——"

"Poor fool !" she interrupted again. (Somehow there seemed to be a general unanimity of opinion that I was a fool.) "Keep your blessed ignorance : you will know everything all too soon !"

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This was tantalising: suspense is a most worrying thing, and the anguish of the unknown is worse than anything else. I said as much to her.

"Is it?" she returned. "Is it? Think, then, of the most awful death you can fancy, and pray to God that you meet it, rather than what is in store for you and for me!"

This was pretty strong. I began to feel a bit nervous as I asked her to explain herself a little more clearly; but I could get no coherent answer; she seemed to be quite beside herself with fright, and to all my questions only answered with sobs.

This put me in a quandary: I was quite ready to believe that I was mad, because that explanation covered everything so far as I was concerned; but it didn't account for her way of going on unless she were mad also, and we were both in an asylum; but mad or not, I didn't like to see such a pretty girl so unhappy. Of course, the proper thing for me to do was to clear out of the room, into which I had doubtless been put by mistake, but, on the other hand, I didn't like leaving her without some attempt at consolation. So I thought, and thinking, went over to her and tried a little persuasive reasoning—smoothed her hair, and all that sort of thing. She didn't mind, poor girl; she was too

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broken down with terror to mind anything just then; she simply sat moaning, and praying a little now and again.

"I say," I said presently, "you must stop this sort of thing or you'll go mad."

"Mad?" she cried—"mad? I would to God I could go mad! People who are mad don't feel anything, do they?"

"It depends," I said, guardedly. "My—ahem—studies in my profession——"

"Your profession?" she broke in. "What are you, then? A doctor?"

"Yes, I am a doctor; at least, I'm a budding one."

"Then in your case the devil is taking vengeance on his own," she said, vehemently.

"Really, madam!" I retaliated, a bit nettled, for, though I was inattentive to it, I was proud of my connection with "the noblest of all the professions"—"really, you use very strong language! If you would condescend to explain yourself, to say what this bogey is, we should talk less at random."

She leant forward, then clutched piteously at me like some wretched devil of an in-patient when a demonstration is going on.

"Don't let us squabble," she said. "In a time like this even a companion in misery is

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a boon from heaven. Can't you guess the hell that lies ahead; the inevitable, unpreventable hell?"

"No," I said, "I can't."

"Then think no more about it. But, for God's sake, as I have spared you that knowledge, do what you can to alleviate my misery and to occupy my thoughts! Come, I will show you the city. In looking at its wonders one can for a space forget the present *and the future.*"

I judged it best to humour her. I never expected to see any city, unless the fantasy of my first entry into the establishment still remained; then I reckoned to see some interesting sights. Still I should have a chance to take my bearings and perhaps find out where I was; and in any case the girl by my side was nice-looking, even if she did suffer from delusions. So we went out of the house together, none interfering.

CHAPTER V

THE CITY ON VENUS

THE first person we met outside was a clergyman, one of those poor, half-starved looking men that you come across now and again in the back streets of any large city—men who work hard and get precious little for it in this world, either in money or thanks. I'm not a religious sort myself, but if I come across a fellow who goes in strongly for the vulgar abuse of parsons, the "he's just the same as we are—on the quiet," style of thing, I knock that man down. Of course, there are black sheep among parsons—young Ritualist curates and such like—but you can't damn a whole profession just because a few lunatics in it are blackguards as well. The thing runs on all fours with most other things; but there's a difference. My own profession, for instance (I call it my own profession, though I've not got my L.R.C.P.

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yet), just reverses the whole business—all doctors are reckoned angels because there are a few kind-hearted fellows here and there among them.

This parson—his name I learnt later was Winward—addressed my companion as Miss Alson, and that is the way I got to know her name. Curiously enough, I had made no attempt to discover it before. He, like her, was exceedingly melancholy; and though he worked up some show of interest when she told him that I was going out to see the city for the first time, I could see very well that it was forced. Yet he was anxious enough to accompany us, asked me, in fact, quite eagerly, whether I minded.

I told him that if the lady had no objection neither had I, so after some mutual introductions we all walked on. It was just as we did this that I heard the parson ask of Miss Alson, in a whisper evidently not meant for me to hear—

“Does he know?”

“No,” she whispered back; “nor has he the slightest suspicion.”

I didn't quite like this mystery, but I couldn't very well say anything about it; and after all, I thought, it probably only had to do with whether or no I suspected their sanity, which, at that time, God forgive me, I indeed did.

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We walked past the clump of houses similar to that from which I had emerged, and on towards others that looked for all the world like big ant-hills. All this time we had not seen a single specimen of the huge insect that I had encountered coming in, and I began to congratulate myself upon the absence of this hallucination ; my single interview with the one that I had seen had been more than enough. My self-congratulations were premature, however ; as we neared the ant-hills—I call them so for want of a better term—a curtain that hung over an aperture in one was pushed aside, and there emerged into the lamplight one of these awful Shapes. It passed close to us ; in the strong light I could recognise its every detail, yet I am unable to describe it in words that will adequately convey any idea as to its form. I can only bid you imagine a sort of compound of elephant, mosquito, and flea, a Thing seven feet high or more, with shining scales upon its sides, with great folded gossamer wings, with antennæ, and a hairy, flexible trunk, capable of almost endless extension, set on top of its head, with horned eyes capable of *expression*, with a mouth capable of speech. This is but a feeble picture, but it is the best that I can manage ; our human minds and language are alike incapable of conceiving or des-

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cribing anything that has not its counterpart on Earth, we possess neither the words nor the ideas. Therefore I have likened it to the earth forms that it most nearly resembled ; though I do it an injustice thereby, since for all its strange shape there was about the Thing a certain grandeur, if I may so term it, not to be described.

My companions took no notice of the Thing, and I at once jumped to the conclusion that I alone beheld it, and therefore stared straight at it, pretending not to see. I did this till it met us, but I suppose my face must have expressed my terror, for presently both the girl and the parson laughed—a loud jarring cachinnation with little merriment in it, the only laugh that I ever heard in that horrible land.

“Excuse our mirth, sir,” said the parson. “The fact is that all strangers regard the Thothéen as creatures of fancy seen by themselves alone, and pretend not to notice them. In the mental prostration to which one is reduced by a residence here, a very small thing seems ludicrous.”

I still did not believe the Thing to have any real existence, but it was a consolation to find others who believed in it as well as myself ; few men like to be singular in their delusions.

As the creature came abreast of us, it



“A leading inhabitant,” he added.

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stopped, gave a half-turn in our direction, and—spoke. There was no doubt about the speech this time, I had tried to persuade myself that when I heard one speak before that it was fancy, but there was no explaining away possible now: it spoke with a distinct articulation in Zumeena's language, and the parson answered it in the same. What is more, there was expression in its eyes as it spoke—a look such as a man might give to a dog.

"This," said the parson to me, introducing—actually introducing—the Thing—"is Ef. He says he will be pleased to do anything to alleviate your stay here, and regrets that, his knowledge of English being limited as yet, he is unable to converse with you direct. A leading inhabitant," he added.

"Oh yes; quite so. Charmed I'm sure," I stuttered, while I mentally asked why he hadn't described the Thing as the Lord Mayor or something of that sort. It was only my desire to humour him that kept me from it.

The creature looked at me a moment, then placed its trunk in my hand, apparently for me to shake, but this I was too startled to do; I just stared idly at it. Presently it withdrew its proboscis, and, seeing my nervousness, looked away from me and began to talk to the others; freely to

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Winward, and more slowly to the girl, as though to allow her to grasp the meaning of the idioms.

This conversation lasted for about five minutes ; then there were farewells, and we walked on again.

"Well?" said my companions, as soon as the Thing was out of earshot. They evidently expected some sort of comment from me.

"Do you," said I, for I had resolved to clear the mystery, "see this Thing as I see it?" and I described it so well as I was able.

"Pardon me," returned the parson quite seriously, "but you err in describing Ef, or any of the Thotheen, as 'things.' They are Intelligences vastly superior to us."

"The aboriginal inhabitants of Venus, I suppose," said I, sarcastically, for I was wearying of this seeming lunacy.

"Exactly," he returned. Then I heard him say in an undertone to the girl—"I thought you said he did not know."

"I can't say how he knew that," I heard her answer, "but he doesn't know the——"

She paused ; and then I couldn't get a word out of either of them for some time, they seemed to be sunk in the depths of despair.

I walked on moodily enough, I was getting

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unspeakably bored with my fellow-lunatics, as I took them to be. The city didn't interest me much, wonderful and all that though it undoubtedly was. When a man has it firmly fixed in his head that everything he sees is merely a fantasy of the brain, you cannot expect him to take a lively interest in his hallucinations. It was only in a sort of dream that I viewed a vast lamp-lit dome above me, with misty galleries hanging in mid-air, up which went crawling, creeping things ; dark passages plunging deep into the bowels of the earth ; a stream of Thoths riding upon strange and gigantic machines ; and, here and there among them, the semi-nude men and women like Zumeena's friend Kaha, people with solemn, eager faces, marked and warped all over with an expression of passionate thirst for knowledge.

We did not approach any of these : I noted that my companions carefully avoided the human beings—they seemed afraid of them. Miss Alson, in particular, hid herself away in the shadows of the ant-hills when she saw any of them coming, and I noted upon these occasions that the girl's face was white with fear. Whatever her terror was, whatever its cause, fanciful or not, there was no doubt that it was a very real thing indeed to her ; and I felt sorry. I tried to soothe her, so

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much as I dared considering our very short acquaintance, though I might have kissed her or anything else without protest; she was too paralysed to have noticed it. I pondered over this as a curious thing, because she wasn't, to look at, at all the sort of girl a fellow tries on larks with.

We had been wandering thus for perhaps an hour, when I heard a sort of screech behind me, and a moment later a tentacle swung round me. I gave a yell—it was so sudden and startling; then, following a natural impulse, I struck at it several times.

It was a foolish thing to do. In a moment I seemed to have a regular galvanic battery through me, and felt much as an electrified frog must feel. We had a chemistry master at school who used to amuse us in the "lab" with turning a battery on to a frog, and just then I remembered how we used to laugh at seeing the reptile squirm. Now, however, I vaguely wondered why we had laughed. It must be no laughing matter for the wretched frog, if frogs feel anything like I did then. A gigantic neuralgia seemed to suddenly possess and shoot all over me, my arms swung about in an uncontrollable fashion. Then I felt myself lifted up into the air, lights and houses dashed past my eyes in a bewildering succession, and a moment later I found myself sitting dazedly upon the

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ground in front of my house (as I already thought of it), a great Thoth standing over me, and before me—Zumeena.

She was clad now in the fashionable deshabelle, but something in her face as she looked at me checked the little raillery that had risen to my lips so soon as I had recovered from my fright. Zumeena, in this horrible place, did not look the sort of person to joke with, no matter how scanty her costume.

CHAPTER VI

ZUMEENA AND I TALK SCIENCE

"GET up, and let me feel your pulse," she said, shortly.

I did so, rising none too steadily.

"Exactly," she continued; then she looked at the lids of my eyes, and went through one or two other tricks of the profession.

"Well," said I, "are you satisfied?" I didn't like being hauled about in this unceremonious fashion—it didn't seem courteous between fellow - practitioners. "Are you satisfied?" I repeated.

"No," she answered, "I am not. You should have rested before you began to wander. You seemed over tired, from your walk and carriage, therefore I sent my assistant, Tait, to bring you back. You had better have a meal and go to sleep again."

"Look here," I said, gathering courage,

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"you're more of a med. than I am. I want to know whether I'm really mad, or whether it's only D.T's. Everything seems most infernally queer, yet I appear able to think quite normally."

She had another good look at me before she answered, then she said, calmly—

"No, your are not mad, nor do I note anything else the matter with you. Your brain is naturally an inactive one, but everything is normal."

"I'm hanged if it is!" said I. "What about these insects I keep on seeing—the lunatic parson, and the daft girl? What about this place? What about everything round me? Why, at this very moment you look as though you'd forgotten to put on—I mean, you look as though you were in a sort of ballet-girl full dress. Excuse my appearing personal, but *that*, perhaps, will convince you that I can't see straight."

"I am simply in the costume of the country," she said.

"Exactly," I cried; "but to me you look only to have on—well, it's as though my eyes were a sort of Röntgen ray camera."

"You need not try and explain. As I have told you, you see things as they are—you are on the planet you call Venus."

"Look here," I remonstrated, "that's hypnotism. But it's too utterly ridiculous.

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Do you mean to tell me that you seriously expect me to believe that I could be in Bayswater one minute, and millions and millions of miles away the next? It's too utterly ludicrous, Miss Zumeena. I may be a fool, but——"

"You are," she interrupted, "you certainly are, for all that you have a splendid physique. I have told you the absolute truth."

I suppose my face must have expressed something—blank incredulity, horror, amazement, or what not—for she suddenly started forward, catching at my hand.

"You *will* go mad, though," she said, "unless you get more in harmony with your environment, and I had rather lose a dozen subjects than have that happen. Come inside, and I will talk to you."

"Rather lose a dozen subjects," I repeated to myself as I followed her in, and then I nearly laughed out loud. "Good Lor'," I thought, "she's gone and fallen in love with me, and she's using up her medical terms to express her devotion. Ha! ha!" But all of a sudden I stopped laughing, for I remembered Miss Alson and her great blue eyes, and though I'd only seen her once, yet I somehow didn't like to think of those eyes and another woman at the same time. All this I thought as I followed Zumeena; but

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one pretty obvious conclusion never occurred to me at all, that I was, as she had said, indeed a fool. But that's one of the comforts of being a fool—you never know it at the time.

She led the way into a kind of sitting-room, and taking a seat bade me do the like.

"Now then," she said, "this sort of thing won't do. Surely the evidence of your senses is sufficient to convince you—for all that you cannot comprehend the why and wherefore—that you are no longer in London."

"London is a big place," I said, thoughtfully. "The sewers now would be like this, or it may have undiscovered catacombs, like Rome and Paris, and——"

The look she gave me was so contemptuous that I didn't conclude the sentence—if I had spoken of my father's pill as a great curative agency she couldn't have looked more scornful—I just sat and waited for her to talk. Talk she did, for a good half-hour, and I have done my best to set down the gist of it; though, of course, I didn't believe a word of it then, and, for that matter, am sceptical of most of it, even now.

"You have heard, perhaps," she began, "of a country called Egypt?"

"Oh yes, of course," said I, seeing that she paused and seemed to half expect an

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answer; "Arabi Pasha, and the Mahdi expeditions, and the fellow who gave an ad. to a rival pill."

"Your education has been more extensive than I had supposed," she said; "however, I refer to a period anterior to your studies. It would be unnecessarily tedious, nor would you follow me if I entered into details, but know that the ancient Egyptians came originally from Mexico."

"Columbus—Greasers," I interjected, to show that I was *au fait*; but she choked me off with that sneer of hers which made me feel so uncomfortable.

"Thank you," said she, "but you need not trouble to comment. As I was saying, the old Egyptians came from Mexico, the more intelligent emigrated to the banks of the Nile, for political reasons that do not concern you; and there, in prehistoric times, they attained to a civilisation far superior to that of nineteenth-century Europe. They discovered many things, and improved upon many inventions; and, amongst other things, * they perfected the art of instantaneous transmission from one locality to another. This, I may tell you, is—like all important discoveries—a very simple thing, being based upon the commonest of Nature's laws."

I near as possible interrupted her here to explain the constituents of Plummer's Pill as

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a case in point, but I didn't—she might not have seen the connection, and nothing is gained by giving away trade secrets. She went on—

“Briefly, it rests upon the same principle as electricity ; that is to say, that, given the medium, there is no reason why energy should be located in any special point of that medium—it is, in fine, stationary by chance rather than by design. You follow that ? ”

“Oh, perfectly,” I said. I didn't, but that was no affair of hers.

“Therefore,” she continued, “the question resolved itself into the discovery of that universal medium, which, after experiments which I need not relate, was found to be nitrogen, a substance that pervades all space, though for some reason your scientists have till recently insisted that space—the ether as they call it—must be a vacuum. Consequently, it was merely necessary to eliminate the oxygen and other elements in order to attain control of this force. It was found that, given a tube of nitrogen with any two similar substances affixed to the ends, a body inside that tube would dance continually from one pole to the other. Theoretically it should have remained suspended mid-way ; but in practice this was negatived by the fact that the eternal revolution of the

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atoms constituting any two similar bodies are not quite the same, that between them there is thus set up an exceedingly minute current, which I may call electrical for the purpose of this explanation, and any foreign body in the nitrogen is entirely at the mercy of this current. Now you are probably wondering to yourself how and why we have made no mention of the laws of gravitation ; possibly, also, you may have in your time dropped something into a jar of nitrogen and found it fall just as it would in air ? ”

“ Exactly what I was about to say,” I remarked, thinking that if I humoured her she would be done the sooner. I fancied I heard Miss Alson’s voice outside, and I preferred to chat with her, for all that she was so melancholic, rather than with Zumeena.

“ It is,” went on the lady-doctor, “ exactly the question that would occur to any uneducated mind ” (“ One for me again,” thought I); “ however, it is easily answered. Firstly, the theory of gravitation is entirely false ; and the reason a thing ‘ falls ’ to the ground is simply that it is the natural tendency of all bodies to seek their own level, which is always an imaginary line drawn through the centre of the earth at right angles to their position. This is, however, affected by a second law, for else an object falling in—say, England—

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would travel through the air in the direction of Teneriffe, or some spot on that latitude. That it does not do so is because it is the tendency of everything to pass from a rarer to a denser atmosphere, and the atmosphere nearest the ground is always the densest. Were you to carefully note the fall of a body dropped into a jar of nitrogen, you would note that it did not fall in a straight line, but took a slight, though appreciable, curve.

“This fact having been fully appreciated, it was not long before my ancestors discovered that the specific gravity of bodies is not the constant thing which the wiseacres of the nineteenth century would have us believe ; or, to put it more simply still, they found out that, just as men argued that the sun went round the earth because it *appeared* to do so, so, because one thing *seemed* to be heavier than another, they assumed that it was actually so. The discovery that the earth revolved round the sun has not made men one whit less credulous about other ‘accepted facts,’ and it is only by accident that they ever attain to any judgment other than that by appearances. My ancestors, being more intelligent, found that a subtle gas surrounds everything, always in a very slight degree, but a varying one ; and that the less there is of this gas the heavier is the object. The whole crux of the problem lay

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in the analysis of this gas, and a hundred years elapsed before any one could resolve it into its constituent parts. The solution came at length ; like all great discoveries, the difficulty lay in the fact that it occurred to no one to attempt the simplest experiment. At last, some genius noted that when an object was immersed in water, small bubbles appeared on its surface. These, everybody, then as now, had assumed to be air, because that was the *apparent* explanation ; but this chemist, collecting the gas thus liberated, analysed it and found that it was not air at all, but an element in gaseous form identical with the argon recently discovered by one of your greatest scientists. Your scientist discovered its existence and was content to stop ; *we* advanced at once to its practical demonstration, and found that its nature was to cling about any object, and that the more of it there was the lighter the body ; but that though normally constant the amount could be increased and that, *given enough of this gaseous envelope, a body has no weight at all !* Later, our scientist increased the amount of argon, and the substance simply disappeared——”

“ Jolly useful for a conjuring trick,” said I. “ But what licks me is, where he got his argon from ; being an element, he couldn’t manufacture it ? ”

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"Argon is not an element," she returned ; "few things are. Our science reduced the number to five, and we were doubtful of two of these even. We soon discovered how to manufacture argon, the trace in the earth's atmosphere being too small to be of use. By chance we discovered one of the stones that had disappeared when argonised, and it gave us a key. Previous experiments had shown us that a body enveloped in an excess of argon acted just as a substance in the nitrogen tube ; now we learnt that, while if the forms differed a body would fly eternally from one object to the other, if the forms were similar it would fly from the smaller to the larger and remain there.

"The origin of the pyramids, which a later and more utilitarian age made into tombs, was really nothing more nor less than a convenient form for the system of transit we perfected some eight thousand years ago. You will find identical pyramids in Mexico and Egypt, and between these two points we carried on continual intercourse by means of argon-coated cars. By pure chance and accident a party of my ancestors, being in one of these cars upon a sandy plain, were suddenly transferred to this planet. They alighted upon a stretch of sand here—by great good fortune at night. The Thothteen, as we call the aboriginal inhabitants, who

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were then, as now, in a high state of civilisation, received them kindly, and managed to convey to them by picture-writing that they must avoid the daylight, or the sun's glare would probably blind them, which, indeed, it would have done. These adventurers lived among the Thotheen for many years, rendering them service medicinally ; for by a curious chance these creatures of Venus, far more intelligent than men in everything else, are absolutely incapable of anything in the way of surgery or medicine. In course of time some of our people got back to earth ; but not till many years had elapsed, since they dared not attempt to return until they had built a small pyramid identical with those upon the banks of the Nile—else they might have been carried off into space, who shall say whither ?

“ The communication thus established became at length a regular thing ; and, when it was found that a large structure was totally unnecessary, a quite common occurrence. Nowadays we use a small de-argonised ornament—de-argonised by electrical means which you would not understand even if I explained them to you. I had left one behind me when I started a year or so ago for Earth in order to pursue my medical studies—for this is a miserable place for diseases—and also to collect specimens. To return here, I merely

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worked a lever that discharged argon round the car, liberated a smaller edition of the ornament that I had left here, and the journey was accomplished practically instantaneously—in five seconds if you care to know the exact time.”

“I see,” said I; “but I don’t make out how you’d get back to Earth again.” Her description had been so plausible that I had come unconsciously to take it as gospel—so gradually that I couldn’t fix the point where my scepticism ended and my credulity began.

“Going to Earth we have to employ older methods, but such are no concern of yours. To continue the history that I am giving you—my people, finding the Earth drifting into barbarism, gradually migrated here. A few remained behind, and the descendants of these degenerated. For awhile they prostituted their science by posing as gods and goddesses, and so are responsible for all the religious myths of the ancients; later they mostly fell victims to religion, and many of them were burnt in the Middle Ages as wizards; though I have heard that a few still survive in Thibet, where, under the name of Mahatmas, they puzzle the world with mysterious disappearances and other conjuring tricks based upon what they remember of the properties of

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argon. We eliminate these folk during our Earth visits when possible ; though, of course, it has to be carefully done so as not to arouse the suspicions of those who remain. We are not anxious to have the motive force that we use re-discovered ; we see quite enough of the Earth-folk to have no wish for their society here. For ourselves, we have only of late taken to visiting our mother-planet, in the hopes of learning thus how to overcome the one thing that baffles us. We have practically eliminated all diseases in the Thothéen and in ourselves, but one thing we have not overcome. It is still impossible for us to penetrate into the sunlight without dark glasses, and a glimpse of the sun maddens with pain if it does not actually kill. That we should learn to overcome this is getting to be daily more essential, since we are no longer of use to the Thothéen, and the day may come when either we or they must be exterminated. Personally, I think that it is almost a case of the sooner the better, for our race, from intermarriage and antiquity, is dying out, and males in particular are very scarce. It has been mooted once or twice that we should select husbands from the Earth-folk, but no one cares to be the first to do so, and thus we drift on."

"Of course, of course—very natural and proper," said I, a trifle hastily, maybe, but

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the conversation seemed to be taking a personal turn, and I didn't fancy it.

"Nevertheless," she went on, "I had some serious thoughts about mating with you," ("The devil you did," thought I) "and you may have noticed a certain tenderness and sympathy towards you in my bearing. Still, when it comes to the point, when I put your feeble intellectual powers against your splendid physique, when I realise that the time must come to decide definitely between Affection and Science, my mind misgives me, and I cannot settle which to choose. I have been turning it over for several days, and have finally decided to leave the choice to you ; say, therefore, which it shall be."

This was pretty straight, thought I, and considerate too, for which I felt inclined to thank her. Still, I didn't like to seem to decline this matrimonial offer too abruptly, so I thought a little before I answered ; then I made her what I still think was, under the circumstances, rather a neat little speech ; one to the effect that I wasn't a marrying man altogether, that my natural aversion to intellectual pursuits would prove a terrible trial to her upon a more intimate acquaintance, and, finally, that I had such a respect and admiration for Science, that the idea of in any way hampering her pursuit of it was distasteful to me in the extreme.

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"In fine," I concluded, "I will sacrifice my happiness, and undergo all the misery that my words are choosing for myself, rather than destroy your chance of fame."

I said all this as naturally as I could, and with a good deal of apparent emotion, which, seeing how bony I now saw her to be, was very creditable to my powers as an actor. If I'd only been able to dispense with the exam., I'd have been in Harley Street by now, I'm sure ; I can hold my own with any one when it's humbug that's wanted.

"You will undergo all misery for my sake, Thomas," she repeated, quite softly, and with a sort of little purr. "Oh, Thomas, I know now what love means, and what a small thing my love is beside yours." And then she came forward and began to kiss and fondle me with tears in her eyes, making a great to do.

This was more than I had bargained for. It was all very well to give her a little blarney, but when she took on like this I began to feel ashamed of myself—it seemed so rough on her, for she didn't look the sort of girl likely to find a lover in a hurry ; I thought that, perhaps, I was her last chance, and began to fancy how she'd feel about it if she only guessed my actual feelings. And ever and again she kept murmuring to herself in her own language, between whiles cooing in

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English that love was sacrifice, and that by my sacrifice I had shown my wonderful love for her.

I was wondering what the deuce I was to do to get out of it, when she suddenly released her embrace.

"It but makes it the harder for both," she cried, "and you might repent and lose the high esteem of you that I now have."

"No," said I, "I am firm." I chanced to think of the blue-eyed girl again just then, and that steeled my heart. Otherwise, I might have yielded to Zumeena's advances, and been the medical patriarch of Venus at this day. She wasn't bad-looking when you didn't have any one else to compare her to, and I had always found love a matter of propinquity. Any woman is beautiful so long as there isn't a prettier one to distract attention, as Balzac or one of those fellows said. However, in my case there was a prettier one ; I thought of Miss Alson, and said again that I was firm and resolved.

"Then," said she, "I must go before you waver—or I——"

She gave me one more kiss—she did a wonderful lot of kissing for a scientific young lady—and ran from the room, crying as she ran—

"Don't blame or reproach me afterwards, Thomas. *You shall have anæsthetics as*

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much as possible, and my loved hand alone shall operate ! ”

And with this she was gone.

She had been gone about a couple of minutes when an idea came to me—I am not naturally a swift thinker. I ran over her words, her talk about Science, her last sentence, and then, suddenly, I saw it all as clear as day ! I sprang to my feet, shrieking to her to come back. I rushed to the door and, finding it closed, beat frantically against it in the extremity of my terror. I forgot my blue-eyed fancy ; I forgot everything save one thing.

“Zumeena,” I yelled, “Zumeena, come back ! I love you, I adore you ; I cannot live without you ! Come back ! Come back ! Come back !” And then as there was no answer I shouted out every endearing name that I could think of, with curses mingled in between ; I was as near as possible mad from sheer fright and terror.

I heard a fumbling at the door, and, thinking it to be Zumeena returned, I called her “Love” and “Darling” again and again. Then the door opened and the little parson, very white about the gills, stood before me.

“Hush,” he said, “for God’s sake, hush ! Miss Alson may hear you any moment. Do not add to what she has to bear. Do not increase her agony of apprehension.”

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"Damn Miss Alson, and you too!" I roared, for I was a deal too frightened to care for a soul except myself. "Out of the way ; I want to find Zumeena."

"It is useless, my friend," he said, still barring my exit.

At that moment I caught a glimpse of Zumeena at the far end of the passage, standing just outside the door. It was the work of a moment to hurl the parson on one side ; then I rushed madly out.

"Zumeena !" I shrieked, "my love, my darling ! Spare me ! Save me ! For God's sake, have pity ! I love you, I love you ; I do, indeed."

This I cried as I ran, and when I got up with her I fell down before her, kissing her feet and mumbling incoherently.

She bent down and looked at me. Just at the very first there was a something of tenderness in her eyes, but it passed in a second, and in place of it came a look that shamed me into silence even more than her words.

"So," she said, "you have guessed the truth, which before, it seems, you did not even dimly know. I have wasted my heart on a cowardly craven, not upon a hero as I fondly thought. Get up, you cur, and go back to the house till such time as you are needed for Science. I could forgive your

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terror, but not your deception. When you are experimented upon there will now be no anæsthetics, and no heart pangs will make my hand tremble; and yet—and yet—I doubt if your agony will be greater than mine is now.”

“Devil!” I hissed, “do you think I could fancy an ugly, skinny, old troll like you?” Then I called her other names—the worst I could think of, and I knew a good many. I would have shrieked, but after what she had said I restrained that impulse, and reviled her in the hope that she would kill me in her anger.

“‘Hard words break no bones,’ as your English proverb has it,” she said, calmly. “You had better be silent like a man, than rave in this childish fashion. Bah! it is absurd! You are a Christian of some sort, I suppose; think of the innumerable tortures you Christians have inflicted on each other in the course of the arguments on your ridiculous dogmas. If men and tender women could meet death bravely for a useless thing like a religious opinion, surely you should be able to meet it for the benefit of Science. I do not suppose that the worst of our experiments is any more painful than being slowly roasted to death, which was, I believe, a common occurrence in the palmy days of the Church of Rome; and our

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tortures are inflicted, not to vindicate the ridiculous doctrine of some half-educated sot of a priest, but for the benefit of the whole race of the Sutenrāa. Bah! why do I waste words on a cur like you? Go back to your den, you miserable coward!"

I said no more, but crawled back to the house, too paralysed with horror to be able to rise to my feet. At the door I met Miss Alson crouched in a corner, her face blanched, her lips tightly set. She had heard every word.

As I passed her she put out her hand and took mine in her own. She did not say anything, but our eyes met, and in that touch and glance I recognised a heaven-born sympathy in the hour of my deepest self-abasement. It gave me strength to throw my unmanly terror from me; I rose to my feet a better and a nobler creature than I had been before. After that, though I still shivered when I thought of the future, though I had many moments of agonising apprehension, yet I tried to behave always like a man, and I had no more fits of hysterical horror and fright. For the sake of those blue eyes, for the sake of that touch of sympathy when the meanest might have despised me, I braced myself together and did all that I could to cheer her and make her forget our mutual doom. And as the

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days wore on and nothing happened to us, I began to formulate mad schemes of escape from our relentless foes. The schemes were wild, impracticable even as I first thought of them, yet they were a blessed thing, for without hope to buoy us we must have gone mad in that infernal hell.

CHAPTER VII

A DREAM OF ESCAPE

It was a horrible thing to think that at any moment I might be suddenly led away to undergo the tortures of vivisection, and though I made no mention of it for Miss Alson's sake, I had no end of inward qualms about it. I suppose the little parson must have guessed how I felt, for he came up to me a day or two after my first discovery of what was in store for me (I had apologised for my rough treatment of him) and told me that, at least, one had warning of what was to come when the hour was fixed.

"When you get no food," said he, "then you know that you have but little time left. They always experiment upon you fasting. Therefore, while there is food there is life."

It was sorry comfort, a very poor straw to clutch at, but still it was something, something to know, when one found one's break-

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fast in the morning, that that was a sign of at least twenty-four hours' respite.

"And how long," I asked him, "do they keep you here before—before——" I could not frame the end of the sentence, but he understood.

"It varies. Some have come and gone again in a week, others have been kept for months. I have been here for nearly half a year, I should think ; and for some reason I have, so far, been spared—perhaps because I am old and feeble, but it is small mercy. Miss Alson, who is the only other left, was brought here a few days before you were."

"Did she," I asked, for even in this awful plight there was one thing that still showed power to assert itself—"did she come—alone? Was any one brought with her?"

"She came alone. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing ; idle curiosity, merely," I returned, hastily. It had somehow just occurred to me to wonder whether a lover had been seized with her. It was really no concern of mine, and yet—and yet—somehow I was glad to learn that there was not. Still, as she might have left one on earth, I didn't see that I was much more forward. And then, as I was still wondering about her, the parson answered what I was about to ask.

"Poor girl," said he, "hers has been a

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sad life. She was left an orphan young, and had a hard struggle to live; the feminine market is terribly overcrowded. So far as I can gather, she earned a miserable pittance as governess to the children of some rich tradesman, and, unable to support that life any longer, she answered an advertisement for a travelling companion, was told to call and see the lady requiring her services, and so fell into the clutches of one of these Sutenrāa——”

“Devils!” I ejaculated, “they might let girls alone.”

What more I might have said was checked by the arrival of Phyllis Alson herself, as she crawled wearily into the room. I took her hand sympathetically, for she looked to be in need of some kindness.

“Courage,” I whispered — “courage. I have a plan of escape.”

It was a lie, a clear downright lie, but I would have told a hundred gladly to see a look such as came into her eyes as I spoke. They lit up in a moment; she was a sanguine little woman, and it never occurred to her to question the ways and means—thank God for that—or I should soon have failed miserably.

She sat down by me saying, “Escape! escape!” in a bated breath sort of fashion, I still holding her hand and whispering to

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her to keep up a good heart. And then, how it all came about I don't know to this day, but somehow the parson had slipped from the room, and we were alone, and I took her other hand in mine and we looked each other in the eyes. I had lied to her to make her happy, then all of a sudden, looking into the clear blue depths of her eyes, I felt there was something else that I could say to make her happy, something that would be no lie, and which would make our hell a heaven so long as life should be left us, and again after it had been torn away in anguish—after that, for ever. And feeling so, I leant forward and told her that I loved her.

She did not answer for a little while ; then, very softly and gently, she told me that she too loved me. I kissed her on the lips ; her dear head sank upon my shoulder, and we were very happy for a space—so happy that all the terrors of our surroundings were forgotten, and we dreamed together fond and lovely dreams in which the near and terrible future had no part, even as to us it had then no existence.

So we sat for the best part of an hour ; then Phyllis gave a little cry that something in my pocket hurt her head, whereat I fell to looking for the thing. And presently I hauled out a small revolver—loaded—one that I had clapped into my pocket in a vague

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sort of way the very day that Zumeena had carried me off.

I think Phyllis must have thought that I had suddenly gone mad, for no sooner did I pull out the pistol than I began to kiss it in my joy.

"This is a find, indeed, darling," I cried ; "for now, come the worst, your death shall be painless—aye, and several of your would-be murderers shall die at the same time."

"But," said she, "I thought you had a plan of escape, Tom?" She had got to calling me Tom already.

"Yes—yes," I said, a bit taken aback, for I had forgotten the hopes with which I had buoyed her ; "but this in case it should fail."

"Oh, but it can't fail, Tom, if you have thought of it. You are so clever."

Bless her little heart : she was the first—and the last—who ever thought that of me ; still it didn't do to discourage her, so I told her to go back to her quarters and rest, while I saw to the preliminaries of our plan of escape. And this, after we had taken long and fond farewells of each other, she presently did.

"Courage, dear," she whispered as she left me, "whatever happens I have gained one blessed thing, which no pain or torment can take away. I have learnt to love ; and

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be the time left us long or short, still that time will be heaven—having love.”

Her hopes of escape were dying away, but now that she loved she scarcely felt it—such a change had love wrought in her. But me it affected in a different way; I longed to live now for another reason over and above my own desire for life, and in that frantic longing I had thought of a plan based upon some chance of success. Casting over in my mind what Zumeena had told me, it seemed but a little matter to steal out of this great cavern, find a pyramid, and get a car to it. Then I would return for Phyllis and Winward, and the three of us would leave this detestable planet for ever. If we reached Earth again, no matter where, it would be safety; and failing that, if we were lost in illimitable space—we should at least meet death in peace.

CHAPTER VIII

I PLAN A MURDER

So soon as I had left my sweetheart I hunted up the parson and told him of my discovery of the revolver, my plan of escape, and about my love for Phyllis. For the last he wished me such joy as could be wished, but for the rest he threw cold water on my hopes.

"You may try," said he, "as others have tried before, but you will not succeed. It is not the Sutenrāa that you have to fear, for they set no watch upon us—danger lies elsewhere. The bar to all your schemes is *the sun*—and the sun will drive you back."

"But—night?" said I. "Why should I not go at night, when the pitiless sun is no longer blazing down—what is to prevent me then?"

"What is to prevent you then?" he repeated. "That is more than I can answer, but I assure you that your quest will fail."

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There are innumerable mysterious dangers in this terrible place. Try if you will ; but I have no hopes of your success, and to wish you 'God - speed' would be but a mockery."

"I shall try none the less," I replied. "And should I fail, and the worst come to the worst, we have the remedy of shooting ourselves now that I have chanced upon this revolver."

"No! no!" he cried, with a sort of shudder, "we cannot do that. It is a sin to take our own lives, that is a crime from which Heaven defend us."

I stared at the man in astonishment. A fellow who would deliberately meet a horrible death rather than seize upon the chance of a speedy relief was a mystery to me, and I told him so.

"Our religion," said he, "teaches us that we may not take our own lives. Better a little torment in this life than an eternity of pain for such a sin."

This brought me up all standing, as the sailors say—to be face to face with a man whose ideas of religion were stronger than his fear of torture was a new thing altogether, and one that neither then nor now could I understand. But I resolved in my mind that if his turn came first I would shoot and spare him the agony that was waiting for him ; and

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I did not think that his murder would lie heavy on my soul.

"However," he said, after a pause, changing the subject, "many strange things may happen yet. There is a ray of hope—one of which I have not told Miss Alson, because it is too fragile a reed to lean on as yet; still it is something to lighten the valley of the shadow of death." (Winward was very apt to work texts and pious metaphors into his conversation.) "The Thotheen, as I may have previously hinted to you, are different in many ways to the Sutenrāa, and a large section of them, of whom that Ef we met is the leader, is opposed to their medical advisers altogether."

"That's a comfort, anyhow," said I.

"Yes, so far as it goes. The argument of Ef is that the experiments of the Sutenrāa are useless so far as they—the Thotheen—are concerned, and that, since disease is non-existent, if the doctors are so anxious for research they should experiment upon their own, now superfluous, numbers."

"Zumeena told me something of that," I returned; and then I related to him what that amiable young person had told me about a possible war.

"So they *do* guess," he commented, "that there is a possibility of things going further than talk. I must try and get Ef to come and converse with you one of these days, but

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it is hard to make him or any of them take a strong interest in what may befall us. They pity sincerely, but there it ends."

"If," said I, "you could only make them think that *they* stood a risk of being vivisected when a chance presented itself, maybe their interest would be stronger."

"Plummer," said the parson, "I never thought of that. It is deceptive, but, under the circumstances, surely permissible. It is a brilliant idea, and I sincerely beg your pardon for what I have previously thought of you intellectually."

"Don't mention it," said I. "I'm used to being underrated. Also, I've thought a thing or two of you, so we're square anyway."

Then we parted; he to look for Ef, and I to try and discover a means of escape.

CHAPTER IX

THE NASTURTIIUM GROVE

I MADE my way along one of the passages that seemed to have a bright light at the end of it. None of the Sutenrāa were visible just then, but Thotheen, riding upon the queer machines I have already commented on, were plentiful enough, and following in the train of one of these I presently reached the end of the tunnel. Before me, blazing like a great diamond, was a glittering sheet of sunlit country, all the details lost in the intensity of the light-blaze.

I dared not venture out while the sun shone, my previous experience had taught me the result of that, and the mere glint of the fields was more than I could look upon without dizziness and nausea. This reflected radiance was as hard to look at as the mid-day sun's face is on Earth, and I soon turned

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my back upon it, shut my aching eyes, and waited for the night.

The Thotheen seemed in no way disconcerted by the blaze ; it was, of course, natural to them, and they walked out into it in seeming enjoyment. Why they lived in that great ant-hill of a cavern was a mystery to me, and I passed the time of waiting in trying to solve the question, reaching, as it afterwards turned out, at every reason save the real one, which was of a purely military nature.

I suppose I waited for four or five hours, a dull enough time of it, but after all far less tedious than attending lectures. I had, by this time, accepted the reality of the Thotheen ; and their exodus interested me. It seemed to be a continual procession, an army on the march, and once or twice among them I detected a Sutenrā or two, riding on the machines and looking none too happy. These, I noticed, each carried a large flower like a gigantic daisy in their hands or else had it stuck up in front of them ; and I remember well a wild hope that came to me, that perhaps they were going to be sacrificed.

At last the light, which I gauged by its reflection upon the tunnel walls, changed colour ; and presently, peeping cautiously through my fingers with half-closed eyes, I

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noted that the sun was presumably setting, as the shadows were very long and fainter than they had been before. The heat, too, became a trifle less intense, and at length a blessed twilight fell.

I grasped my revolver, saw that it was in trim, put handy some spare cartridges which were loose in my pocket ; then, emerging from the passage, plunged boldly through the violet moss and on to the roadway.

In the fast-deepening gloom I could make out, far away, visible almost as mists only, a row of pyramids ; and to these I made my way, leaving the road again and striking out for them direct. I began to wish that I had brought Phyllis and the parson with me ; for then, so it seemed, we might have all escaped together without delay.

After I had travelled about a mile I came to a grove of some flowering plants, more like immense nasturtiums than anything else, and into this I wandered. It was now so dark that I could scarcely see my way, and the plants were only visible as a great blackness against the starlit sky.

Inside the grove it was black as the darkest dungeon—no single ray of light penetrated the opaque gloom, and I simply felt my way along, getting one or two nasty tumbles for all my caution, as there was a thick undergrowth every here and there that continually

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tripped me up. Still I was glad to have found the place ; it struck me as being a convenient possible hiding-place in case of need, and I spent some time trying to feel my way to some lair that might be useful in the future. I went very slowly and cautiously, for I did not know what wild beast or reptile might not be hid in those plumbago shades. I encountered none, however ; the only thing that befell me was that I got hopelessly lost, and for a long time I must have crawled round and round in a circle.

This went on for some while ; then I became aware of an intense light somewhere, arrow-like rays of which shot in all directions through the foliage. At first I fancied that it must be the dawn ; but, presently, creeping towards the dazzle in order to learn the worst, I saw that it was not the sun, but an infinity of great lamps that made this intolerable light. For lamp or sunlight, it was more than my eyes could bear, and I sank down, burying my head in the moss. I wanted to get back again, for I felt that it would be useless to proceed, and no other way of progress seemed possible. With my handkerchief tied over my eyes, and my head deep below the vegetation, it was possible to get on in some sort of fashion ; but as I dared not look up to see whither I was going, I think I only circled round the grove

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Suddenly, to my intense relief, the lights went out, and rising to my feet I ran as hard as I could back towards the great hill that represented home to me. My feet were cut and bleeding, but I still pressed blindly on and had covered three parts of the distance when the lights were turned on again.

Then I resumed my old methods, and so doing came full tilt into a Thothien lying upon the ground, moaning occasionally as if in pain.

I had learned that these creatures were not to be feared, so I boldly rested in its shadow. It turned and looked at me, half raising itself as it did so, and I saw that it had a black, jagged burn in its side ; but, of course, I could do nothing to help it beyond propping the sore with a knife, in the hopes that a little blood-letting might relieve it ; and apparently this did, as its groaning ceased and it lay quiet.

I heard a heavy body fall near me, and some more groaning ; and at the same time the glaring lights grew less fierce. Looking cautiously through my fingers to find out the cause of this, I saw that dead Thothien now lay all around me, and that many of the lamps had been knocked over. The cause of this I could not ascertain, but ever and anon enormous jagged flames seemed to shoot around, tearing the sky to pieces, so

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

that I took it some terrible thunderstorm must be raging except that there was no thunder. From the distance, however, came a low incessant rumble ; but just as I decided that this was thunder, I made out a great array of Thotheen leaping along the distant roadway. Here and there they abandoned those strange machines that I had before noticed ; but in other places they stood around them for a little space, and then the jagged flames increased in volume and intensity. And while I yet looked, and gradually began to surmise that some sort of battle must be raging, a Sutenrā rushed madly past, overturning and falling with me.

It was a chance not to be thrown away—here was one of the hated tormentors in my power. In one moment I was uppermost, the next, I had one hand upon the throat of the Sutenrā, while with the other I felt for my revolver.

It had slipped down inside the lining of my coat in some way—having worn a hole in my pocket—and I could not get at it with one hand ; but being in no mood to let my captive go for a little mischance like that, I set to work to throttle with both hands.

As I did so, my glance fell upon my captive's face, and at the same time my grasp

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

relaxed, and I let my hands fall to my side.

For my prisoner was a woman, and that woman—Zumeena !

CHAPTER X

A BATTLE ON VENUS

"I BEG your pardon—get up," said I. "I have every reason to wish you dead, but I cannot maltreat a woman."

She looked at me in a dazed sort of way, as though she only half comprehended, which likely enough was all that she did, since I had squeezed her throat pretty hard, and she was a good deal frightened to begin with, or she would never have tumbled over me like she had.

"Fly," she gasped, getting her voice presently—"fly, if you would save your life! We are beaten—defeated—the army is in retreat! Help me back to the city if you would save our lives!"

"Just as well be killed out here as vivisectioned inside," said I. Then all of a sudden I remembered Phyllis, who in the excitement I had forgotten, and with that thought I was



Many a time we but missed being fallen on by a hairbreadth.

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

as anxious as Zumeena herself to get back safe and sound. Still, I was minded to try and make what capital I could out of the adventure ; so I asked her to promise immunity from vivisection to the three of us—Phyllis, the parson, and myself.

“Yes, yes,” she cried, hurriedly, “I promise ! But hurry, hurry, or it will be too late !”

I took her hand and started to run, dragging her after me, for she was very exhausted.

That quarter of a mile was the most terrible journey I have ever made. The air seemed full of leaping Thothen, and we were several times knocked down by them in their headlong flight. Ever and again, too, some huge, winged Thothen, its pinions seared and blazing, would fall from the sky with a sickening thud ; and many a time we but missed being fallen on by a hair breadth.

Somehow, however, we escaped, and soon we were upon the roadway. All the lights were out now, and it was difficult to see save when, ever and again, a perfect volcano of blue and green flame would burst out all over the great hill in front of us ; and by the light of this, racing, stumbling, dodging, we reached the comparative safety of the tunnel. Our flight can have been only of a few

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minutes' duration, but a more awful time I never went through.

Once inside Zumeena quickly recovered her self-possession.

"You have a splendid physique," said she, "but you have spared my life."

I made no answer. She had made that remark about my physique before, and had always wound up by implying that I was a fool, and I was not sure that she didn't mean to imply much the same thing again—she was generally logical to a degree, and I already began to wonder whether I had been wise to spare her so easily.

"What were you doing out there, risking your life?" she went on, as we made for the central dome.

I think I have before remarked that I am a fairly good hand at lying, and I proved it again on this occasion.

"To tell the truth," said I—"to tell the truth, having got wind of the fact that a battle was on, my curiosity overcame my prudence, and I ventured out to satisfy my cravings for a sensation."

"You did, did you?" she answered, looking at me sceptically. "Well, there was not much to see. Our Thotheen fancied to surprise some others who are old enemies of theirs, but found them waiting for them; our army is, in consequence, practically annihilated.

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And now, unless allies come to the rescue, the capture of this city is only a matter of time. However, that is little concern of ours; doctors will be in demand for some while to come which ever side wins, and the Thothéen will well bear thinning out."

I was still all of a tingle with the excitement of that rush home through the battle-field, but she was already cool as anything, outwardly at anyrate. She was, it appeared, needed to assist somewhere, so that our interview was a short one—at which I grieved little, for I had other fish to fry, and I was anxious to hurry back to my Phyllis with the good news that we were saved from the terrible future that had hung like a pall over us.

Outside the battle still raged furiously, but in that or its result I had little interest; and I hurried across the square heeding the fight but little, though conscious of an ever-increasing electrical feeling in the air about me. As, however, I knew nothing of what this might mean, I paid it no heed; and, presently, I reached our "home," and Phyllis was in my arms, while the parson gazed considerably up at the ceiling.

"Well," she cried, breathlessly, "you have succeeded—you have found a way?"

"No, not that," said I, "but I have at least done something." Then I told them

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

about the battle, my meeting with Zumeena, and the promise I had wrung from her.

Little Phyllis clasped her hands in joy, then fell upon her knees praying quietly ; but Winward said nothing, and gave me a glance that boded small good for my hopes. I could see that he wished to tell me something, that he was anxious to be rid of the girl before he did so ; and, seeing this, I persuaded her to go away and lie down, which, exhausted as she was with the sudden cessation of the strain upon her, she did without demur. Then I led the parson into my own room.

"I am sorry to seem a Job's comforter," said he, "but, between you and me, build no hopes upon Zumeena's promise. I would not let Miss Alson know, but the word of a Sutenrā is like Pharaoh Necho, King of Egypt."

"Eh?" said I, blankly, and feeling myself turn to goose-flesh all over. I knew nothing of the morals of Pharaoh Necho, but I guessed that he was a big liar from the parson's tone.

"Blind hope is worse than useless," he went on, sadly, "and even if Zumeena were minded to stand by her promise, the others would not. I tell you that, unless some miracle intervene, nothing can save us. This war now raging, though it gives us respite

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because the Sutenrāa are compelled to attend to the wounded Thotheen, is merely making our end the more certain. It is more than ever necessary for them to try and conquer their eye difficulty now, for I am certain that they are bent upon the mastery of this planet, and the present wholesale destruction of the Thotheen is their chance. And, unless they can find some way of facing the sun, such an effort as they propose can only end in failure, for the Thotheen would overwhelm them in the caves—if they are to fight successfully, they must fight out of doors.”

“Why do they try to rise?” I asked. I felt that I must talk ; I dared not sit and think.

“Because the Thotheen suspect ; because they are worked up to a pitch of resentment against the medical oligarchy of the Sutenrāa ; because, easy-going as they are, they are weary of being practically ruled by creatures inferior to them in intelligence.”

“Inferior in intelligence?”

“Yes, inferior in every way. That is a fact that I grasped so soon as ever I became acquainted with the Thotheen. Why, man, they do not speak to each other, these Thotheen, they have discarded the language they once had, and simply interchange all their ideas by thought-transference ; they have invented weapons of war absolutely

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beyond our comprehension ; their command over the forces of nature is illimitable ; and the science of the Sutenrāa, far ahead of Earth science as it is, is child's play to that of the aborigines of Venus."

"Is it?" said I, as an idea struck me. "Then why not get *them* to help us back to Earth?"

"I have had hopes in that direction, but they are very slight. Supposing—to take an earthly analogy—that some tame white mice came into the power of some wild ones. It is easy enough to conceive of cases in which human intellect, however willing, could be of little assistance to them ; and here we are like the white mice. Men do not wish to burrow holes like mice, the Thotheen do not desire interplanetary communication—and even supposing that they should feel enough interest in us to help us, how will we make them understand the way to do so?"

"How, indeed?" I responded, glumly.

"You may well ask," he went on. "In fact, we are just like the wretched victims of some earthly vivisector, the people individually may feel pity, but collectively they are callous and do nothing — they feel sorry, but they have a dim idea that it is for their own personal good that the animals suffer, and then they try and forget all about it as an unpleasant thing. The Thotheen

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

are the same towards us. A few of them, like Ef, hold that it is morally indefensible to torture one creature for another's benefit ; these may save some Earth-folk in the future years, but I fear they will do little for us. I cling to the hope that they may, but it is such a slender one that I only cling to it as a drowning man clings to a straw. Ef paid little heed to my hint that the Sutenrāa might start vivisectioning them—laughed at it in fact."

So we chatted on in melancholy fashion, trying to think out some plan of escape, some method of facing the terrible sun-glare or the hardly less terrible brilliancy of the artificial lamps that stabbed the night-gloom, thinking vainly and miserably.

We were thus engaged when I heard a noise outside, and, looking out, I saw Phyllis running wildly up the corridor.

CHAPTER XI

THE ELECTRICAL BOMBARDMENT

"SAVE me!" she shrieked, "save me! They have come for me! I cannot bear it—oh, I cannot bear it!"

I ran towards her, drawing my revolver. The electric tension still permeated the atmosphere, my fingers tingled as they clutched the weapon, everything seemed charged with electricity; even as I ran I noted that my feet drew sparks from the floor and that little blue flames scintillated from the metal-work.

"I am coming, darling," I cried, as I hurried; "they shall not take you while I live."

Soon I had her in my arms, and she was clutching at me, sobbing on my breast, while I looked around for her pursuers. Men or women, it meant death for them then if I caught sight of them. But I saw no one,

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and presently I gathered from the frightened girl that it was a horrible dream that had disturbed her—the atmosphere, heavily charged with electricity, had had a nightmare effect upon her brain.

I comforted her so well as I was able, then Winward and I saw her back to her room, assuring her that we would remain without and guard her sleep.

Just outside the door I saw a Thothien, lying inert and helpless in the passage, its eyes open and staring, but no movement in the limbs. I put my hand down to touch it: it was icy cold—dead: the electrical storm must have killed it. And if this one were dead, how many others were left alive?

Our human organisms had so far withstood the terrible change, stood it just as a weed will survive the thing that kills the flower of higher growth. All this did not occur to me at the time, but it came a little later, and my surmise, or dread—call it which you will—eventually proved to be fairly correct—an immense number of the Thothien had been slain by the electrical bombardment to which their mountain was exposed; and, but for a counter-attack from the outside which beat off the assailants, I doubt if a single living creature would have survived. But this I did not know of then,

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I merely guessed at results from a single instance.

At the threshold of Phyllis's door I paused. The blood seemed to be congealing in my head, my whole body tingled with the electricity that filled the air, I saw things through a red mist, blurred and dancing; but I loved Phyllis and I could still think of one thing.

"Phyllis," I whispered, bending over her, "Phyllis, darling, I cannot bear the thought of your having to face the terror of being alone. Ours has been a strange wooing and a quick one, and now—now, I who am by right of love your protector, cannot protect you when you need it most. Phyllis, if you would only marry me, then they will not be able to take you, for I shall be always there to save you. Mr Winward is a clergyman—shall he marry us now?"

I said it all incoherently, for it was hard to talk. It was all very lame, and not as I wished to put it, but she understood. I think her thoughts must have gone to Zumeena's promise, which I, like a fool, had forgotten her belief in; for she seemed to try and frame some wondering question; but, what with her previous fright, and the sickening dizziness of the electrical storm, she could not speak; and then, as I was

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trying to gather what she would say, she clasped her hands to her head and fainted.

Somehow the parson and I caught her as she fell, and carrying her in laid her on her bed ; then we, too, staggered and fell blindly across the doorway with a perfect cataract of sparks and flame leaping all about us.

* * * *

We must have been insensible for some time, but as there was no method of telling night from day inside the mountain I cannot say how long we were in a comatose condition. I was the first to come round, and with some cold water I managed to revive first Phyllis and then the parson. The air was lighter now, and though we were all somewhat numbed, we recovered our senses remarkably quickly otherwise — the force against which we had been battling seemed to have few after-effects.

We were in some trouble as to what course to take. Leaving Phyllis to try and get some rest, for her faint could scarcely be called sleep, the parson and I debated outside as to what we had better do. If all the Thotheen were killed we stood a good chance of starving—it would be wise to reconnoitre. On the other hand I did not like to leave Winward to watch over Phyllis ; for, after his curious remarks, I doubted whether he would have the courage or hardihood to

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kill her rather than let her be seized by the Sutenrāa. This fate I had fully made up my mind should be hers rather than that she should fall alive into their hands : but then, also, I would far sooner have trusted my own eyes as to the possibility of getting away. He might overlook a dead Sutenrāa, and the body of one of these would be our immediate salvation, as we could then get the precious darkened spectacles. I already saw myself in fancy, armed with a pair of these, leading the others, with their eyes carefully bandaged to protect them from the light, to the pyramids I had seen in the distance, and thence to earth again. And yet, I feared to leave Phyllis ; so, with many admonitions to search for spectacles, I sent the parson out of the house.

While I impatiently awaited his return, I looked for the revolver, which had fallen from my hand when Phyllis had fainted. I picked it up and examined it, to find that it was useless ; the cartridges had all exploded, the omnipresent electricity must have fired them in some way, and I was left without the weapon upon which I had counted. I cursed it, and sat down moodily.

Winward was back again pretty soon—far sooner than I had expected—to tell me that dead Thothéen were everywhere, but that living ones were about in plenty, too. He

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had also seen Zumeena walking about with others of the Sutenrāa, but no dead ones had come under his ken; and, altogether, he thought that the situation, so far as we were concerned, was unaltered.

I ran as far as the door and looked out. His verdict was obviously only too true, Sutenrāa were all over the place. Coming towards us was a Thothen, carrying something in his trunk which I judged, and rightly, to be the food upon which they fed us.

I do not remember whether I have before explained that we were fed three times a day upon some fruit stuff. We took our meals in seclusion, each in his own room, the Thothen standing over us until we had finished—meal times were not cheerful events by any means.

Hungry as we were we hurried to our rooms and breakfasted. I met Winward as I came out after mine, and noted that his face was very white; but this I attributed to the shock from which we had so recently recovered. He was an old man, and the electricity must have been more dangerous to his vitality than to mine and Phyllis's.

"You spoke of marrying Miss Alson last night," he said, hurriedly; "are you still so minded?"

"Certainly," I returned, "if she be willing; of course I am more than willing."

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"Then do so at once—at once," he urged.

I pointed out to him that she might not wish to marry a man she had never set eyes upon a week ago, that an engagement to marry and matrimony were two very different things ; but he would not listen much to my very half-hearted objections.

"Go and ask her, immediately," said he—"any moment it may be too late !"

"Too late ?" That thought settled me ; without waiting to ask why, I was knocking at her door the next instant. She came out and joined me.

I told her what Winward had said, and what with my pleading and his—for he seemed even more anxious than myself—she consented to an immediate marriage without very much ado, and it was arranged that an hour later the ceremony should take place in Winward's room.

She left us then, blushing prettily, while I, in the sweet fancies of the present forgot all about the future, and I chided Winward at his gloomy look—chided that is, till he told me the dreadful news that he had to tell.

"They brought me no breakfast," said he, "*and you know what that means.*"

I did, and I shuddered. Within twenty-four hours he would be in the hand of the tormentors—and then—I turned sick ; I felt it all with renewed force. I could say

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nothing, but all my stomach seemed to churn, and fanciful pains shot through my head—it was too horrible to talk about, it was too horrible to think of!

“You see,” said he, smiling sadly, “that it is now or never if I am to marry you. Now leave me for an hour, I would make my peace with Heaven in the little while that is left me; and I must pray for strength to bear what is coming.”

I shook his hand and left him, saying nothing—words were vain.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE WEDDING

WHILE I waited to become a Benedict I had nothing to do, so I occupied myself in searching for revolver cartridges, having a faint hope that they had not all exploded. I had had some loose in my pocket during my expedition into the open, but fancied that a little before the electrical bombardment I had put them away in a curious little blue box in my room. I looked in my pockets first, and not finding them went to my own apartment, searching there, but the box had disappeared. As, however, I thought they would have exploded wherever they were, I spent no more time looking for them, but sought instead for anything that would do as a weapon. I hunted about in vain ; I could find nothing ; there was very little furniture, and what there was was made of some brittle substance, strong enough, indeed, to bear

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almost any continuous strain, but breaking at once at a sudden shock.

I cursed the Venus furniture, and tried to think upon some other idea of a weapon ; but could hit on nothing better than my fists and the empty revolver. I could not think coherently, my mind was full of a raging hate against Zumeena for her broken promise, I swore to kill her the moment that I set eyes upon her again, and blamed myself for not having throttled her when I had the chance so recently. This I thought of again and again, dwelling ever on my folly in letting her go when once she was in my power. Of this folly I thought ; of another folly that I was about to commit in marrying a girl of whom I knew absolutely nothing, with whom a week ago I was not even acquainted, I thought not at all. I loved Phyllis and loved her dearly ; but with death seemingly so near and unpreventable, I would have married her even had I not loved her, for the sight of her lonely misery stirred my heart beyond measure. With me as her companion, though I could not save her life, at least it would be in my power to give her a peaceful death.

Then Winward knocked at the door—my wedding hour had come !

I accompanied him to his own chamber, and a moment later little Phyllis stole in

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coily and timidly, blushing prettily as she came.

I need not dwell upon the details of that strange marriage. The service was short, for Winward had to say it from memory, and he seemed also to find it hard to speak. Yet we both tried to bear up gaily, so that Phyllis should not know the fearful thing that was about to befall. And for wedding-ring I used an old one that she used to wear upon her little finger—it had once been her mother's wedding-ring, and now it was hers also.

"Those whom God hath joined together," came the voice of Winward, low and solemn, "let no man put asunder."

They were his last words! At that moment the door burst open and Zumeena, followed by others of the Sutenrāa, entered to take him away.

"How idyllic!" said she, pausing at the sight of our group, "a marriage, is it not?"

"She-devil and liar!" I yelled, as I sprang at her. "You shall die before the parson does."

She stood looking at me quite quietly, not flinching or changing colour for all that there must have been murder in my eyes.

I never reached her. Something cold and slimy wound around me, and I struggled



“ Have you married him, female ? ”

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

powerless in the grasp of a Thothén which had flung its trunk upon me. A thrill of intense pain made me close my eyes, and all the room swam round in ruddy circles, till the pressure relaxed. Then I saw that Winward lay upon the floor, while Phyllis knelt against the wall, her lips moving as though she sought to pray. I tried to call out to her, but could not find my voice—I was choking.

Zumeena came slowly forward.

“I did not quite follow your remark,” she said to me. “To what does the ‘liar’ refer—to my surmise concerning a marriage, or is it merely a general term of abuse?”

My wind all squeezed out by the Thothén’s trunk, I could not answer, but I glared at her for all I was worth.

“Have you married him, female?” she went on, going up to Phyllis and pulling her into a more upright position.

At that I struggled frantically to free myself, but I might as well have spared my efforts; I was absolutely impotent, and merely tortured myself in the effort.

“He is my husband,” said Phyllis, very low, but with a touch of proud defiance in her voice that it did me good to hear.

I could not see Zumeena’s face, for she turned her back to me; but she said no more to Phyllis. Walking on, she came to Win-

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

ward ; and since he did not move at her touch, she knelt over him and felt his heart.

An angry exclamation broke from her. One or two of the others came forward also, talking rapidly in their own language as they did so. I soon gauged what it was they spoke about, for all that I did not know the words ; God had been merciful ; Winward was dead ; and I prayed with all my heart that Phyllis might die too !

She did not die. I saw them seize her and bandage up her eyes, leading her away. I thought they were taking her from me, and redoubled my struggles to break loose ; and thus, seeking vainly to free myself, was carried after her out of the house and along the central space till we reached a gloomy great building, into which they took us.

I tried to nerve myself for the worst ; I struggled no more, for I could not. Those moments are too awful to write about, nor can I attempt to describe the place to which they took us. That was awful in its very commonplaceness.

Nothing, however, was done. We were put into an ante-room, my wife of half an hour and I ; and there they left us, locking the door. There was a grating high up in this door, and through it Zumeena looked ere she followed her companions.

“ My congratulations, Pill-maker,” said she,

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

with a jarring laugh. "A pleasant honeymoon!"

I made no response other than to fling my revolver at her. It glanced harmlessly from the bars; then with another laugh she blew a kiss and disappeared, leaving me to comfort Phyllis as best I might.

I was minded to try and kill her as she lay there sobbing in my arms, so as to spare her from the anguish ahead; but I could not bring myself to do it. "I will wait till she sleeps," I thought; but presently, when her gentler breathing told me that the time had come, I found it just as hard as ever to put my resolution into practice. So I laid her gently upon some cushions that were on the ground, and tried to find some means of barricading the door. I sought in vain; I might as well have left it alone; there was absolutely nothing to be done—we were doomed to utter inaction. To die fighting is easy; but to wait for it in this fashion——

So I sat listless, desponding, and half-senseless, while Phyllis slept like a little child.

CHAPTER XIII

A HONEYMOON IN A LABORATORY

AT length I was roused from my reverie by the voice of Zumeena, and glancing up I saw her looking at me through the grating.

"Thomas!" she cried—"Thomas!"

"Well," I snarled, "what do you want, you perjured liar?"

"I want to speak to you. Here; I will open the door—come out and hear what I wish to say."

I rose readily enough. Like a flash it occurred to me that, once the door were opened, I could seize Zumeena, and by threats compel her to lead us to safety. I planned it all in an instant, to seize and half throttle her, and never to leave go of her throat until we were in a car bound for Earth. Then—well, I half settled to kill her when she was no longer of any use. I daresay she deserved it.

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

She opened the heavy door, and stood waiting for me: of shame for her broken word never a sign upon her face. I came slowly and apparently unwillingly, keeping a wary eye to see if other Sutenrāa were about; but seeing none, I sprang suddenly forward, and, or ever she had the slightest suspicion of what I intended, had one hand upon her throat and the other on her mouth, and so pushed her before me till I got her down upon the floor of my prison. She had made no attempt to struggle, and lay quite still now, staring at me in a cold, wondering sort of fashion that was more irritating than any anger.

"If you dare to speak above a whisper," I hissed in her ear, "I shall strangle you at once."

Then I took my hand away from her mouth, and called to Phyllis to come and help me bind my prisoner, whom I was afraid to release altogether since I was more than shaky with my recent experience in the grasp of the Thothén, and dreaded lest she should spring up and evade me.

Phyllis made no answer to my call, and though I reached out one hand and shook her, first gently, then more roughly, she still slept quietly on.

"You waste time," whispered Zumeena at last. "The female" (she always spoke of

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

Phyllis as "the female") "will not wake for two hours yet : when we were bringing her here I injected a drug that has a soporific influence. Also, when she does wake, she will know neither you nor me."

"What?" I cried aghast. "What do you mean? What have you done? Speak!" And I shook her in my anger.

"Rather you should thank me, if you care for the female," she returned, so soon as she had recovered her breath. "She will start a fresh life from the moment that she awakes. All her past mental inconveniences will be forgotten, her previous existence will be a blank. It is a peculiarity of the drug ; and some of our more frivolous Sutenrāa, when visiting Earth, have amused themselves much with it. You can doubtless recollect cases that your doctors have called 'curious mental aberrations, and which——'"

"Damn our doctors!" I interrupted. "She is my wife—do you mean to say that she will not even know me? You——"

"I mean that. It is a small detail. You will be able to woo her over again if you wish to, so it really does not matter. The practical demonstrations that you bestowed upon me not so very long ago, convince me that the task will present no insuperable difficulty to you."

I felt a qualm or two at this, but just now

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

I had graver matters in hand than Zumeena's happiness—supposing her to have really been so stupid as to take my flirtation with her *au sérieux*—so I explained that I intended to escape, and meant her to assist us.”

“And if I refuse?” said she.

“I shall kill you. No more trusting to the promises of a Sutenrā.”

“Then kill.”

“I mean it.”

“So do I. I am not a man or an Earth-woman; therefore, I do not fear death.”

Then she lay back watching me.

Irritated beyond measure, I made to start choking her. I did not intend to quite kill her, but merely to try the persuasive power of pretty severe pain. It seems a brutal thing to think of now in cold blood; but our case was desperate, and I had my wife to think of as well as myself. But as I saw Zumeena lying there in my power, making no effort to protect herself, my resolution faded, and I paused.

“Well,” she said, “I am waiting, Pill-maker.”

“I can't do it,” I groaned. “I can't kill you like this—much as you deserve it. Zumeena, if you will not help us for fear, will you for pity?”

“Pity,” said she, “is an inconvenient sentiment with which we seek to dispense.”

TO VENUS IN FIVE SECONDS

"Then *what* will move you?" I cried in despair.

"Thomas," she answered, slowly, "you have a splendid physique, but you are a fool."

"You've told me that before," I snapped in.

"You are a fool," she repeated, unheeding. "Nevertheless you have done the one wise thing that every fool does once in his life. It is as well for you that you did not kill me. See what I had brought you."

She opened her hand, and in it lay the half-dozen revolver cartridges that I had mislaid and lost!

Exactly what I said to her I don't know, but I believe I kissed her many times in my joy. Then I fell to cursing my folly in having sought to kill our would-be saviour; but to my embraces and apologies this extraordinary woman was alike indifferent; she seemed to bear me no ill-will for the rough treatment to which I had subjected her, and her bearing otherwise was just as negative.

"Oh, Zumeena, how I have misjudged you!" I said presently, when I was more composed.

"You have," she smiled; "but as I have observed—till you must be quite convinced of the fact—you are a fool. Thomas of the

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physique I admire in the abstract from a medical point of view, but Thomas of the foolish brain I am interested in for a very different reason."

I groaned inwardly. I was out of one trouble to be in for another—lesser, it is true, but teeming with awkward possibilities. I was in the power of this woman ; without her aid we could never hope to return to Earth, and if she meant love-making I dreaded what would come to Phyllis—poor little Phyllis, who would feel no jealousy, for she would not even know her husband when she woke. And Zumeena was not likely to let Phyllis stand in her way. It might mean life to me, preservation from torture, but——

"For a very different reason," she repeated, interrupting my thoughts. "Thomas, the fool is the most interesting psychological study I have ever met with, and psychology has charms for me—is my pet hobby."

"Eh?" I asked, feebly. I was a deal too used to being called a fool by her to mind that little personality.

"Oh! Thomas," she laughed again, "I never met man or woman so simple as you! When most you think you are right you are altogether wrong."

It was an enigmatical statement this ; I made no comment upon it.

"Come," she continued, "your wife will

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wake now if you call her. Then we can be going ; and within an hour you shall be back on Earth."

"Earth?" I almost shouted in my incredulous joy; "do you mean it—actually mean it?"

"Of course I do. Wake the female.'

CHAPTER XIV

FREE !

I TOUCHED Phyllis.

She moved slightly ; but she did not wake till Zumeena took her hand and raised her up ; then with a sigh she opened her great blue eyes and gazed vacantly round. She looked at Zumeena, she looked at me, but neither terror for the one nor love for the other showed in her face—only a gentle glance of inquiry. Zumeena's words were true enough ; Phyllis began a new life from that day—her past was obliterated and dead ; I was mated to a wife who did not even know her husband's face !

It seemed a horrible thing, and I shuddered, till I thought of all the awful memories from which she was thus spared ; then I shuddered no more, but thanked God that the drug had killed her mournful past.

Better a new life begun to-day with happi-

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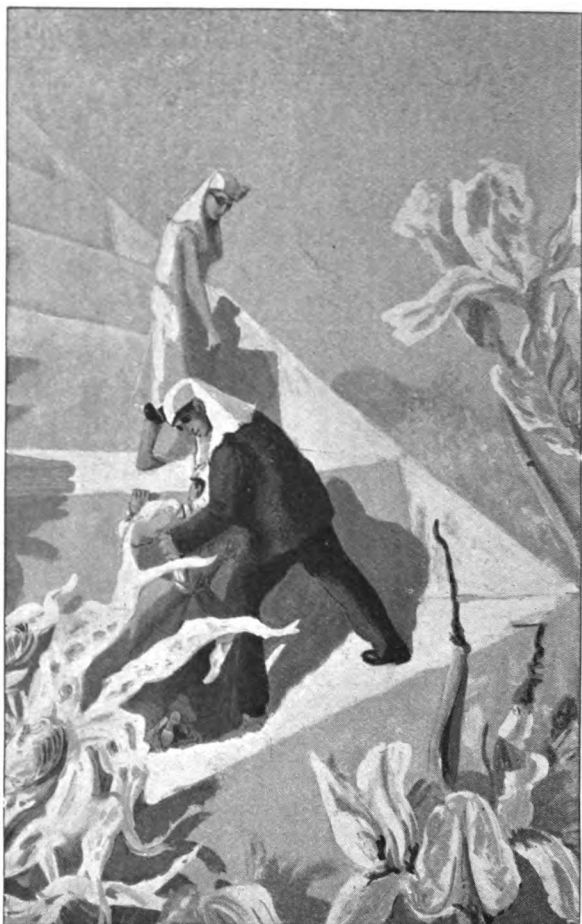
ness lying ahead, than a continuation of the old one : no matter what pleasures the future might bring, the nightmare memories of Venus would ever intervene to kill and destroy them. But it was hard, now, to see no love-light in her eyes ; and I began to wonder whether she had ever loved me at all, but had merely clung to me as a possible protector. I did not like to think that love could die.

“ A curious effect, is it not ? ” observed Zumeena in her usual dispassionate way. “ Well, let us be moving on—time presses.”

She led the way out, Phyllis following without question at her bidding, while I brought up the rear, taking the precaution to load my revolver as I went along—it did not do to be over-trusting even now, and Zumeena’s motives were entirely beyond me.

In the big laboratory the lady-doctor went to a drawer and selected a couple of pairs of dark blue spectacles and two of those curious headgears, which she handed to Phyllis and myself ; and putting on these when Zumeena donned her glasses, we went out by some side entrance that led directly to the open.

The sun was hot and the glare intense, even with the protecting glasses, but beyond this we pursued our way without inconvenience, for the headpieces we wore were wonderfully cool. No one molested us.



Bidding us follow swiftly if we would save our lives.

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There were a great many Thotheen about—one of which I took to be Ef, but they were all so much alike that I could not be sure. These looked at us curiously, I thought, a glance that Zumeena seemed to return anxiously ; but as they did not interfere with us I soon paid them no attention—my thoughts were concentrated upon the pyramids growing ever larger and larger as we neared them over the violet moss.

As we reached the base of a pyramid and began to force our way through the dense flowery vegetation, I heard a sharp exclamation from Zumeena, who had glanced round. A moment later a dazzling flash seemed to light up everything ; we were thrown violently to the ground ; then came a most appalling detonation.

“So ends the empire of the Sutenrāa !” said Zumeena—“the Thotheen have destroyed the city.”

The why or wherefore I did not pause to inquire ; Zumeena, with feverish haste, was clambering up the huge steps which were cut in one side of the pyramid, bidding us follow swiftly if we would save our lives. This we did ; I eagerly, Phyllis with docile lack of interest ; and so in an incredibly short space of time we had reached the flat top, where there stood a car similar to that in which I had been brought to Venus.

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"In!" cried Zumeena. "In—or we are lost!"

We jumped inside—the three of us—and the door slid back automatically as we did so.

The scuttles were open, and through the thick glass I peered, anxious to see something of the transit through space. But nothing happened. I could still see the ruins of the distant city, and in front of it groups of Thotheen with their strange machines. Ever and again all this would be blotted out in a flash of flame that seemed to envelop us, and I would fancy that we were ploughing through the sun, only to find, on the flame dissipating, that we were still upon the pyramid.

"We can do nothing," said Zumeena, in reply to my unspoken question. "Here we are safe, for the car is impervious; but the electrical storm that they are making renders it impossible for us to move. They will tire by and by; then we may off. . . . Female, you had better go to sleep again—it is the occupation for which you are best fitted."

This was very unkind to Phyllis, since the poor girl had, till quite recently, been nearly dead for want of rest. However, it was of no use to squabble with Zumeena over a matter of this sort at the present time; so I held my peace; and Phyllis obeyed her like

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a child, falling asleep with her dear little head pillowed on my shoulder.

"'Tis strange, Thomas," said Zumeena, after a pause, during which we had sat in silence watching the bombardment to which the Thotheen still subjected us—" 'tis very strange that——"

"That I am such a fool, I suppose," I interrupted. I was getting almost cheerful again, and no longer disposed to listen tamely to Zumeena's everlasting observations on my intellect.

"You are almost a thought-reader!" she smiled. "What I was thinking, however, was that it is a most curious thing that you should attach yourself to this female, whose intellect is now absolutely nil."

"I love her," said I. "Having loved her once, would you have my love cease when she needs it most?"

"Sound melodrama! Well, I do not squabble with you, and in the future years to watch the progress of your two lives will be quite a fascinating pursuit for me. We three——"

"Zumeena," said I, earnestly, "we are not yet out of the wood; but, granting that we safely return to Earth, will it be wise for you and I to be together? The strain on the heart-strings—the—the—er—won't it make you unhappy to see me another's?"

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"Why?" she asked, with such a look of innocence, that all my fancies were dashed to the ground. This woman whom I thought was doing all this for love of me, over whom I had felt so many qualms, was more than indifferent. It was a blow to my self-esteem.

"You wonder why I spared you," she went on. "Well, the fact is, the Thotheen have taken a sentimental turn, and massacred nearly all my fellows from 'humane' reasons. My tender regard for your safety induced them to spare me. That is all! See, the Thotheen are coming on; they will stop firing presently and rush us; if you have courage enough, we can be saved. Have you the nerve to pull that lever the instant I give you the word? One second's hesitation and we shall be lost in space. I will stand here—so—where I can look through the scuttle—keep your eyes on me."

I did as she bade me. Through the scuttle beyond her I could see a mass of Thotheen hopping and springing over the intervening space, while the blue flames around us increased in intensity. Then, all of a sudden, these stopped, and Thotheen seemed to be dragging at the car.

Suddenly Zumeena pulled a lever—then a second.

"Now!" she shouted, and as she did so I pulled mine, a little too slowly if anything,

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maybe. There was a violent shock ; our lamps went out ; we were flung upon the floor, stunned and helpless.

* * * *

When I came to myself again everything was still and dark, but a very faint light came through one of the fire-blackened scuttles. I roused Zumeena, asking where we were ; and while she looked through the scuttle to try and discover, I sought to revive my poor little wife, who had been badly bruised by the shock.

"I hope," said Zumeena, presently, "that we are on top of the Great Pyramid, and if the time indicators are not disarranged we have been there nearly twenty hours. You pulled the stopping lever a little too late ; the wonder is that you did not kill us all. I will step outside and see if I can ascertain our location—it is breathable air, at any rate, for I can see distant figures moving far below."

She touched a spring, and the door slid open noiselessly. She stepped out, and as she did so there came the sound of a piercing shriek—

"Holy Moses ! 'Tis the mummy of Pharaoh's daughter come to life !" Then there came more shrieks and the clatter of a heavy body falling.

"We are on Earth, in Egypt," said

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Zumeena, looking out, "and a friend of yours must have been expecting you. He has left hastily, and here is his luggage." She pointed to a pot of white paint and a huge brush lying near.

"I ran outside to join her, heeding her words but little in the joy of reaching Earth again after all my troubles. I could have fallen upon the pyramid and kissed it, like the Latin Grammar man in Roman History, but that something else arrested my attention, Painted in huge white letters upon our car was the legend, still wet—

PLUMMER'S PILLS.

"We have reached civilisation," said Zumeena, with a little sneer; "and as my costume is rather slight" (she still wore the *deshabille* of Venus) "I will say goodbye. . . Fetch the female out and I will go."

I brought out little Phyllis. The Great Pyramid was not the most cheerful place to honeymoon upon, but to be rid of Zumeena I would have taken up quarters on the top of Vesuvius.

Zumeena looked at us both for a moment, and then she went to the car and stood in the doorway.

"I have a fancy to wander," said she, "and we are not likely to meet again. You

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may hear of me, perchance, as the goddess of some African tribe, but you will not see me—our ways are apart and we say farewell. But, ere I go, remember what I told you—‘when you think yourself right you are always wrong, and only when wrong are you right.’ There is something for you to puzzle over. Do not pay attention to any more women doctors, for some are women first and doctors after. Farewell.”

The door shut. For one instant I saw her face peeping at me through the half-clouded scuttle; the next, the car had vanished, and Phyllis and I were alone.

* * * * *

We reached London without adventure. I had money enough about me to travel comfortably to Alexandria, and there we had an agent for the pill, so I was all right after that.

There had been a great to-do over my disappearance, but opinions were divided as to whether I had eloped with a lady-student at the hospital, or privately been made away with by some jealous doctors. My father favoured the latter theory, and, I believe, found it a useful advertisement.

As to my tale, he pooh-poohed it utterly; and he had some show of reason. The house in Bark Place was found untenanted when visited, and no one to this day knows

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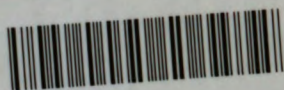
what became of Zumeena's landlady ; our advertiser in Egypt, also, never came home again. The governor, in fine, treated the whole as a trumped-up tale to excuse my marriage ; but when he saw Phyllis he so far changed his opinions as to raise no opposition to a re-marriage—which I thought advisable—and when upon the wedding day he suggested the Pill to Phyllis as a cure for nervousness, and the dear girl innocently took one and called it nice, his feelings altered altogether and he became quite fond of his daughter-in-law.

Subsequently, he asked me to write this little story ; but he died before it was finished, and I can't for the life of me remember the moral that he wished inserted. Still, as this moral only had to do with the pill, it possibly does not much matter. Phyllis has learnt again to love me ; she and I are happy as can be, and the sale of the pill more than suffices for our needs, hence there is no occasion to puff it here. But I often wonder what became of Zumeena.

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